

HOGWARTS LEGACY **REVIEWED**



PC GAMER[®]

PREVIEW

REDFALL

FANGS-ON
WITH THE
VAMPIRE FPS

EXCLUSIVE ACCESS

STAR TREK[™] RESURGENCE

DISCOVER THE NEXT-GENERATION
OF SCI-FI ADVENTURE

PLAYING
GOD

THE COMPLETE
HISTORY OF
GOD GAMES

FUTURE

ISSUE 382

PREVIEW

PACIFIC DRIVE

SURVIVE THE WORLD'S
DEADLIEST ROAD TRIP



TESTED

NVIDIA RTX 40-SERIES

A QUANTUM LEAP
FOR PC GRAPHICS

CYBERPOWERPC



Hyper Liquid 700

CPU Intel® Core™ i9-13900K

GPU MSI GeForce® RTX 4090 24GB

HYPER LIQUID COOLING

Premium Deionised Coolant

Starting from **£4749**



Hyper Liquid 600

CPU Intel® Core™ i9-13900K

GPU MSI GeForce® RTX 4090 24GB

HYPER LIQUID COOLING

Premium Deionised Coolant

Starting from **£4249**

HYPER LIQUID PCs

Custom Water Cooled PCs



Order today!

✉ sales@cyberpowersystem.co.uk ☎ 03333-237776

Follow Us! 🎵 📘 🐦 📷 🗨

Visit our website!



All information correct at the time of printing. Subject to change.

Join the conversation!



Discuss all things PC gaming with fellow
readers at our official forums
forums.pcgamer.com

PC GAMER

PC GAMER

#382 MAY 2023

Future Publishing Ltd

Quay House, The Ambury, Bath BA1 1UA

Tel 01225 442244 | Email letters@pcgamer.com

www.pcgamer.com

facebook.com
/pcgammagazineyoutube.com
/pcgamertwitter.com
/pcgamertwitch.tv
/pcgamer**PC GAMER**
Forum

forums.pcgamer.com

PC GAMER PRESENTS
PC GAMING
SHOWpcgaming
show.com

All contents © 2023 Future Publishing Limited or published under licence. All rights reserved. No part of this magazine may be used, stored, transmitted or reproduced in any way without the prior written permission of the publisher. Future Publishing Limited (company number 2008885) is registered in England and Wales. Registered office: Quay House, The Ambury, Bath BA1 1UA. All information contained in this publication is for information only and is, as far as we are aware, correct at the time of going to press. Future cannot accept any responsibility for errors or inaccuracies in such information. You are advised to contact manufacturers and retailers directly with regard to the price of products/ services referred to in this publication. Apps and websites mentioned in this publication are not under our control. We are not responsible for their contents or any other changes or updates to them. This magazine is fully independent and not affiliated in any way with the companies mentioned herein.

NEXT ISSUE ON SALE: April 27, 2023

If you submit material to us, you warrant that you own the material and/or have the necessary rights/permissions to supply the material and you automatically grant Future and its licensees a licence to publish your submission in whole or in part in any/all issues and/or editions of publications, in any format published worldwide and on associated websites, social media channels and associated products. Any material you submit is sent at your own risk and, although every care is taken, neither Future nor its employees, agents, subcontractors or licensees shall be liable for loss or damage. We assume all unsolicited material is for publication unless otherwise stated, and reserve the right to edit, amend, adapt all submissions.



We are committed to only using magazine paper which is derived from responsibly managed, certified forestry and chlorine-free manufacture. The paper in this magazine was sourced and produced from sustainable managed forests, conforming to strict environmental and socioeconomic standards.



Member of the
Audit Bureau of
Circulations
12,708
January
December 2018

For press freedom
with responsibility

Future plc is a public company quoted on the London Stock Exchange (symbol: FUTR)

www.futureplc.com

Chief executive **Zillah Byng-Thorne**
Non-executive chairman **Richard Huntingford**
Chief financial and strategy officer **Penny Ladkin-Brand**

Tel +44 (0)1225 442 244

“FORMER TELLTALE DEVS ARE CONTINUING THAT STORIED LEGACY”



The PC has always been the home of story-focused adventure games, from 1976's *Colossal Cave Adventure*, through the plethora of super LucasArts point-and-click games of the 1990s such as *The Secret of Monkey Island* and *Grim Fandango*, and onto the later branching narrative experiences delivered in Telltale Games' games such as *The Walking Dead*.

ROBERT JONES

Twitter

@rmicholasj

This month

Pondered how Minsc keeps his space hamster companion Boo safe while deep in bloody combat.

Now, former Telltale devs are continuing that storied legacy with *Star Trek: Resurgence*, and you can discover why it looks so special by reading this issue's huge cover feature.

ROBERT JONES

PRINT EDITOR

robert.jones@futurenet.com

SUBSCRIBE TO
PC GAMER
Check out our
latest offer!
SEE p44

The PC Gamer team

**CHRIS LIVINGSTON**

Twitter

@screencuisine

This month

Transformed into a one-man preview bot and played games, lots and lots of new PC games.

**FRASER BROWN**

Twitter

@FraserIBrown

This month

Commanded lots of tiny men to kill other tiny men. Oh, and he also played *Company of Heroes 3*.

**ROBIN VALENTINE**

Twitter

@robinvalentine

This month

Fought hard not to use an assortment of vampire puns in his preview of *Redfall*.

**TYLER COLP**

Twitter

@tylercolp

This month

Read back issues of PC Gamer magazine aboard an intergalactic locomotive. You heard!

PC Gamer (ISSN 1351-3540, USPS 24170), May issue 382, is published monthly with an extra issue in April by Future Publishing, Quay House, The Ambury, Bath, BA1 1UA, UK. Airfreight and mailing in the USA by agent named World Container INC 150-15, 183rd St, Jamaica, NY 11413, USA. Periodicals Postage Paid at Brooklyn, NY 11256. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to PC Gamer, Air Business Ltd, c/o World Container INC 150-15, 183rd St, Jamaica, NY 11413, USA.

Contents

#382
MAY 2023

SUBSCRIBE TO
PC GAMER
Check out our
latest offer!
SEE p44



Monitor

08 THE TOP STORY

Stunning *Sons of the Forest* success

10 THE SPY

New gaming rumours investigated

12 SPECIAL REPORT

The shocking state of PC ports

14 SECRET LEVEL

Improving accessibility in games

16 INCOMING

The hottest games to get excited for

Previews

18 Redfall

22 Sons of the Forest

24 Pacific Drive

28 Dungeons 4

30 Age of Wonders 4

Features

36 Star Trek: Resurgence

46 Honkai: Star Rail

50 The history of god games



18 REDFALL

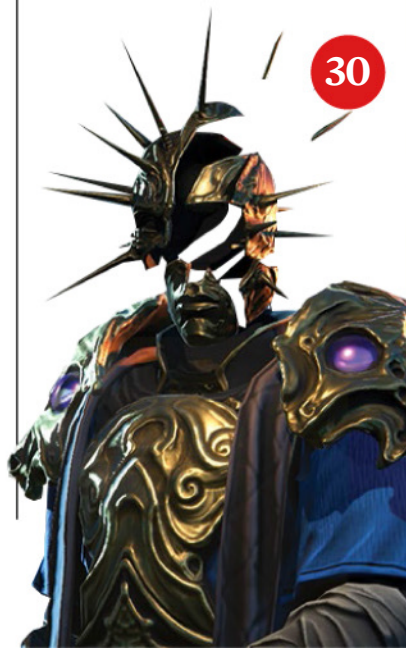
Arkane's new open world co-op FPS tasks you with surviving a vampire siege and fighting back with your friends. Can the *Dishonored* devs raise the stakes?

36 STAR TREK: RESURGENCE

Former Telltale Games devs look set to deliver the exciting next generation of sci-fi adventure.

46 HONKAI: STAR RAIL

The thrilling free-to-play future of the HoYoverse is here. Get up to speed now in our detailed feature.





50 THE HISTORY OF GOD GAMES

From *Populous* to *Black & White* and beyond, we celebrate one of PC gaming's most iconic genres.

94 NVIDIA RTX 40-SERIES GPUS

Do Nvidia's new GeForce RTX 40-series graphics cards deliver? Our super test reveals all.

58 HOGWARTS LEGACY

Does the new Wizarding World RPG deliver on the magic? Read our full review to find out.

Reviews

- 58** *Hogwarts Legacy*
- 64** *Wo Long: Fallen Dynasty*
- 68** *Labyrinth of Galleria: The Moon Society*
- 70** *Atomic Heart*
- 74** *Returnal*
- 76** *Company of Heroes 3*
- 80** *Wanted: Dead*
- 82** *Like a Dragon: Ishin!*

FREE GAMES

- 88** *Babdbi*
- 89** *Feet in the Snow*
- 89** *Stereogram*

THEY'RE BACK

- 90** *Sea of Thieves*
- 91** *Divinity: Original Sin 2*
- 91** *Fran Bow*

Hardware

- 94** **GROUP TEST**
- 98** **TECH REPORT**
- 100** **TECH TALES**
- 102** **BUYER'S GUIDE**

Extra Life

- 106** **NOW PLAYING**
Sherlock Holmes, SiN, Hitman 3

- 110** **UPDATE**
Disney Dreamlight Valley

- 112** **MOD SPOTLIGHT**
Top *Hogwarts Legacy* add-ons

- 116** **HOW TO**
Get started in *Hogwarts Legacy*

- 118** **DIARY**
Prey by Proxy: Part 2

- 122** **WHY I LOVE**
Classic CRPG character portraits

- 124** **REINSTALL**
Neverwinter Nights

- 128** **MUST PLAY**
Turn-based strategy games



MONITOR

NEWS | OPINION | DEVELOPMENT



PRODIGIOUS OFFSPRING

SONS OF THE FOREST rewrites the Early Access survival narrative

Survival game *The Forest* has almost 400,000 'Overwhelmingly Positive' reviews on Steam at the time of writing, so maybe it wasn't actually very surprising that its follow-up, *Sons of the Forest*, was highly anticipated by the fans. However, when the new Endnight Games title surpassed even Bethesda's *Starfield* to become the most-wishlisted game on Steam and then, upon release, had more people playing it even than *Hogwarts Legacy*, it was extremely clear that PC gaming had a massive hit on its hands.

TOP: There's been an almost endless supply of Early Access survival games recently.

Sons of the Forest sold more than 2 million copies in its first 24 hours on sale, a number that, by the time you read this, will have increased even more. Endnight Games, a studio that initially was composed of just four people, has hit gold and, based on some of the incredible (and mad!) gameplay experiences we've seen

**SONS OF THE FOREST
SOLD MORE THAN 2
MILLION COPIES IN
ITS FIRST 24 HOURS**

online since, it is incredibly well deserved. PC gamers, including multiple PC Gamer staff members, are having an absolute blast in the Early Access survival game.

EARLY ACCESS SURVIVES

Sons of the Forest's success, though, seems to mean a lot more for PC gaming than just it being another top indie title that is exclusive to the platform. Early Access games, and specifically Early Access survival games, have as a genre almost become a bit of a joke in 2023. Venture onto Steam's forums, Reddit, or many other PC gaming online chat repositories and it's easy

WHAT'S YOURS IS MINE

SECRET CRYPTO-MINE



Authorities in Massachusetts have discovered a secret crypto-mining operation built in the crawlspace of a school, seemingly by a city employee. Patched into the school's wiring, it's estimated to have drawn about \$17,500 in electricity before it was found. ■ **RV**

ALL BAN

DOTA CHEATERS TRAPPED



A tool that let cheaters access hidden game info in *Dota 2* caused a stir recently. Valve's response? Create a new, dummy part of the game that only that tool could access, track everyone reading it, then ban all 40,000 of them at once. ■ **JW**

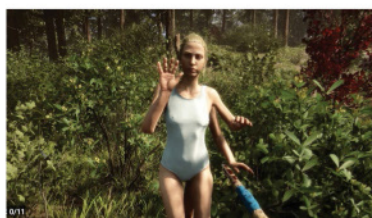


POWER SURPRISE

CORSAIR RMX SHIFT



Corsair's gone and done the impossible: it has made an actually exciting new PC power supply. To achieve this magnificent feat, it's taken all the connectors, shrunk them down and put them on the side of the PSU. The end result is a power supply that's actually super easy to install. ■ **JR**



TOP: That fire just doesn't seem big enough to be basking that luxuriously.

ABOVE: Virginia is one of the few things in *Sons of the Forest* that doesn't want to kill you.

to find gamers relating tales of woe with the many Early Access survival games.

From broken games that remain massive piles of jank for months or years, through to devs overpromising features before launch only to never deliver them, to oversaturation of the market. With new Early Access survival games seemingly launching every week, this is a genre that now has a really rather damaged reputation.

So the fact that *Sons of the Forest* earned the trust of so many PC gamers and has been such a big hit at launch feels like a momentum shift in the Early Access survival narrative. It's at least proved that plenty of diamonds can still be found in the rough, you just have to know where to look.

That's not to say that *Sons of the Forest* is problem-free, far from it, with plenty of aspects of the game still clearly needing work. At launch, fish traps seemed to be properly broken, for example, and there are item exploits and plenty of physics glitches too. However, the key thing is that the game is still very playable and enjoyable despite these issues – gamers are not being shortchanged at launch.

This is what Early Access should look like, not a promissory IOU note for a playable game. ■
Robert Jones

Highs & Lows



HIGHS

Baldur's Gate III

Baldur's Gate III is finally confirmed for an August 31 release.

Overwatch 2

Mercy player Gladowl hid in a bush to buy time for their team to return and then win the game.

Tim Schafer

Tim Schafer of Double Fine Productions was inducted into the Academy of Interactive Arts and Sciences' Hall of Fame.

Diablo

Blizzard and Han Kjøbenhavn partnered to produce *Diablo* themed clothing for Milan Fashion Week.

Dragon Age: Origins

Lead writer David Gaider wants a remaster with 'extra-realistic slimy nipple textures' for the Darkspawn broodmother.

Kerbal Space Program 2

Missing features and bugs have led gamers to say *KSP2* is 'too Early Access for Early Access'.

LOWS



The Spy

■ BUT WHO WATCHES THE SPY?

The world The Spy operates in is as shadowy and dangerous as it is glamorous. Yes, sure, The Spy can often be found at his gentleman spy's club in Mayfair, reading PC Gamer while wearing a pair of slippers and smoking a pipe, but The Spy's bread-and-butter day job would leave lesser men quaking in their Sneak-o-matic 3000s.

The biggest danger for The Spy is misinformation and disinformation, which thanks to the invention of the internet and something called 'page views', has now made The Spy's job harder than trying to persuade Gabe Newell to stop buying knives and make *Half-Life 3*.

Take The Spy's recent foray into the murky underworld of *Starfield* rumours. After suiting up in The Spy's patent-pending jet-pack equipped spacesuit and hovering outside *Starfield* director Todd Howard's office window, The Spy learned nothing more than that Mr Howard is surprisingly good at closing window blinds.

Not to be deterred, though, The Spy then used his jetpack to cruise into the *Starfield* Rumour Mill™, where he immediately heard from a very large, well-known source in British journalism that, according to a "leaked *Starfield* release date" we "could see *Starfield* launch on Xbox Game Pass this summer", with a launch date of June 29, 2023 communicated.

The Spy wouldn't be The Spy without a dogged determinism to

supply only the most authoritative rumoured information to his clients, though, so naturally a base-level of rumour verification took place. Unfortunately, what The Spy discovered caused him to spit out his pipe.

Firstly, this was no leak. Instead, this date stemmed from a public *Starfield* page on GOG.com's Galaxy client that happened to list June 29, 2023. Secondly, this 'leak' came from no insider who proclaimed authority or inside connections, just an ordinary gamer who spotted the listing and wrote on an online social media platform "*Starfield*: June 29th 2023?". After the end of The Spy's investigations, though, The Spy came to the conclusion that, once again, he had had to almost certainly dodge more unverified and most probably false information. Ah, c'est la vie d'un espion.

CECI N'EST PAS UNE LEAK

The Spy, like all gamers, is very much living in a post-truth world, and one that has – intentionally or not – tied unverified information or misinformation to financial or political reward. And, let The Spy tell you, the front line of this warzone is stickier than a stick-carrying stick insect playing cricket on a sticky wicket.

One way to deal with this leak-mageddon seems to be get out ahead of and out-leak the leaks, with gamers on the official *Starfield* subreddit proposing that they "just start talking about *Starfield* like it's already released".

Examples include supplying information about how you can fix the game's corrupted save bug by going into *Starfield*'s game folder, opening the file `bugthesda.ini`, and then changing the line `itjustworks=0` to `itjustworks=1`.

While others include advice on how to find the NPC who provides the player with a secret quest to go to planet 1111 where every texture is a picture of Todd Howard's face. And one revelation reveals how *Starfield* has a planet called New Uranus in the Alpha Anus star system. Scoop! ■
The Spy



THE SPY
The Spy practices spying on The Spy while The Spy sleeps.

THE SPY, LIKE ALL GAMERS, IS VERY MUCH LIVING IN A POST-TRUTH WORLD

This month in... 2013



1 *RuneScape* was our cover feature this month ten years ago and is one of only a few other fantasy MMOs that is still running today. The game launched in its first form all the way back in 2001, so in 2023 is now over two decades old. It's free-to-play today in both *RuneScape* and *RuneScape Old School* forms.

ISSUE
252, May 2013
ON THE COVER
RuneScape
IN THE CINEMAS
Star Trek: Into Darkness

2 This issue was a cracker for reviews, with *BioShock Infinite*, *Tomb Raider*, *StarCraft II: Heart of the Swarm*, *SimCity*, *The Banner Saga* and more judged.



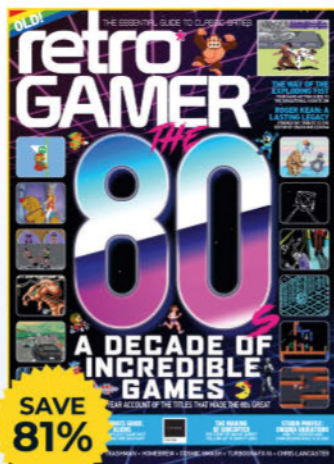
3 We were rightfully excited about the *Thief* reboot and said in our preview feature that it "looks an assured reinvention of a fiercely guarded series". When the game finally came out in 2014, though, it proved to be merely competent with us bestowing upon it a score of 79. A good but not great reinvention, then.



Spring Savings

SUBSCRIBE FROM JUST £3

BIG SAVINGS ON OUR BEST-SELLING MAGAZINES



See the entire range online at

www.magazinesdirect.com/spring23

or phone 0330 333 1113 and quote code SP42

OVERSEAS
OFFERS
ALSO
AVAILABLE

Offer closes 30th April 2023. Offer open to new UK subscribers only. Savings are based on cover price. After your trial period ends, your subscription will continue at the price shown at the point of purchase. We will notify you in advance of any price changes. Please allow up to six weeks for delivery of your first subscription issue (up to eight weeks overseas). Payment is non-refundable after the 14-day cancellation period unless exceptional circumstances apply. Exclusions apply. For enquiries, please call: +44 (0) 330 333 1113. Lines are open Monday-Friday 8:30am-7pm, Saturday 10am-3pm UK Time (excluding Bank Holidays) or email: help@magazinesdirect.com. Calls to 0330 numbers will be charged at no more than a national landline call, and may be included in your phone provider's call bundle. For full t&cs, please visit magazinesdirect.com/terms.

Special Report

PCG INVESTIGATES

PORT CONTROL

A string of crappy **PC PORTS** in recent years have PC gamers on edge

The top-voted Steam review for monster battler *Wild Hearts*, the day after it was released in February, was a thumbs down: one of approximately 1,700 negative reviews posted in 24 hours, earning it a 'mostly negative' summary. "The price is higher than the fps you will be able to pull in this game," the review reads. 571 people marked it helpful. Five people reacted with a slow clap emoji.

This cratering of *Wild Hearts*' reviews reminds me of what happened to *Warhammer 40K: Darktide* in December (currently mixed, with nearly 30,000 negative reviews). It reminds me of *Final Fantasy VII Remake*'s barebones port from late 2021. It reminds me of when *Nier: Automata* was review bombed because Square Enix left it unpatched for four years, then released a better version on the Microsoft store. There's a feeling in the air right now that game studios are turning in shoddy PC ports, and that PC performance in general is getting worse.

It's the year 2023! If we can't have flying cars, surely at least we can have PC games that don't stutter every 30 seconds. There have been bad PC ports forever, but we've raised our standards after years of quality ports like *Grand Theft Auto V* and *Days Gone*. And 'same as it ever was' is a

poor excuse – it's reasonable to hope that past mistakes won't be repeated forever. Some major publishers sure don't seem to be learning, though.

Some cross-platform PC games in recent years have earned praise for nailing both performance and options, like *Hi-Fi Rush* (a rare Unreal Engine 4 game without stutters) and *Death Stranding* (an early showcase for the power of Nvidia's DLSS). But enough games have launched lately with either bafflingly bad performance or fundamentally missing features that there's ample reason for PC gamers to be frustrated again.

Console ports still often bungle some of the details, and gone are the days where we were thankful to have any port that wasn't a flaming dumpster fire. Also gone are the days where better-than-console performance was still reasonably affordable.

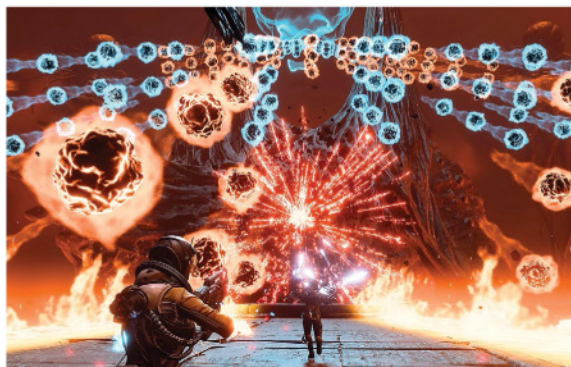
"What I want to see from PC gaming hardware most of all this year is some semblance of value," our hardware editor Dave James wrote online in January. The Nvidia RTX 4080 costs \$1,200 – \$500 more than the GTX 2080 cost five years ago. So no wonder we're looking at ports with a more critical eye these days. Either you've spent loads of cash and expect a game to run like a dream with all the bells and whistles, or you're on weaker hardware that suffers mightily when a port isn't as optimised as it could be.

My PC, trying to run *Wild Hearts* at more than 30fps.



Shader compilation

'Shader compilation stutter' is a particular performance boogeyman in PC gaming today. Shader stuttering is a short but sharp frame drop triggered when a graphical effect is triggered on-screen for the first time without being cached in advance, especially common in Unreal Engine 4. Some PC games precompile all shaders before you start playing – a practice we'd like to see more!



FAR LEFT: Sony's *Returnal* launched with some stutter on PC, but is otherwise a fantastic port.

LEFT: Square Enix left *Nier: Automata* messed up for four years, but it did finally patch it up.

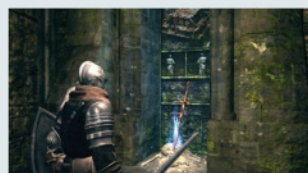
ALL-TIME LOWS *A quick tour of the worst ports in PC history*



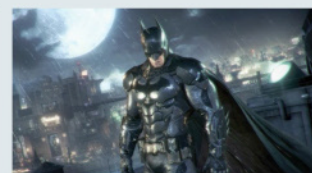
STREET FIGHTER II 1993
The backgrounds in this DOS port were static images, the speed was all wrong, and dear god, the music. Butchered!



SPIDER-MAN 2 2004
The console game's web swinging was legendary. The PC version made you point and click at web icons.



DARK SOULS 2012
Prepare to Die Edition was locked at 30fps, 1024x720, had busted mouse controls and Games For Windows Live.



ARKHAM KNIGHT 2015
Batman's swan song ran so poorly at launch it was pulled from sale... and was still rough when it came back.

With a new generation of consoles on the field, we do need to adjust some of our expectations of how demanding a PC game should be. A game isn't unoptimised just because you can't set everything to Ultra, which we typically could do during the PS4 generation, from 2013 to 2020. But I don't think that's the root of most of today's criticised ports.

Steam reviewers lambasted *Forspoken* for looking worse than its trailers – and worse than contemporary open world games – while being basically as demanding as *Cyberpunk 2077*.

Sony's first big PC port, *Horizon Zero Dawn*, launched with substantial issues, including broken anisotropic filtering and poor borderless windowed performance, though it was much improved through patches.

HD remasters of classic games inevitably seem flawed in some way that modders have to fix: *Ninja Gaiden Collection* and *Chrono Cross* are offenders from the last two years. *The Callisto Protocol* had a severe stuttering issue at launch due to a file mix-up, which was, at least, quickly patched. *Gotham Knights* pushed high-end hardware despite having a more barren, less attractive open world than seven-year-old *Arkham Knight*. *Hogwarts Legacy*, *Final Fantasy VII Remake* and *Evil West* are all Unreal Engine 4 games with stuttering issues.

Elden Ring, a year after launch, still exhibits similar stuttering problems – particularly disappointing in a game hard locked to 60fps. *Dead Space* launched with fuzzy textures and stuttering thanks to variable rate shading, though a patch quickly fixed the former issue.

Some launch day issues can be forgiven and forgotten with patches. Others not so much. *Wild Hearts'* performance on PC is vastly out of line with where it should be, and sub-60fps performance on consoles hints that this was simply how the game was built and publisher EA decided it was acceptable to release.

DELAY GAMES

It doesn't have to be this way. More games should be delayed if performance isn't up to snuff. This would

disappoint some players, but it'd be refreshing to see a publisher like EA explain in detail what needs to be done and why. Releasing a game with such blatant framerate issues is just poisoning the well. Even better than a last-minute delay: plan a beta period with enough time to actually fix shit after. If you can't move the release date, salvage the launch by releasing

in Early Access where expectations are different.

Whether we like it or not, PC players have to get used to stuttering being an ongoing problem, and one that's not likely to be solved in 2023. Outside big budget games, PC gaming in 2023 is more exciting and vibrant than it's ever been. And even with the performance issues we can expect from nearly every triple-A launch, it's still better than the days when unlocking framerates routinely caused games to go haywire. To keep PC gaming healthy we just have to keep praising the ports that get it right – and pushing for the ports that get it wrong to acknowledge their issues and fully address them. ■

Wes Fenlon

**MORE GAMES
SHOULD BE DELAYED
IF PERFORMANCE
ISN'T UP TO SNUFF**

ACCESS ANYTHING

HARRIET FRAYLING on accessibility in games, and helping developers to improve it

As well as being a producer, Harriet Frayling is also a freelance games accessibility consultant. In addition to helping developers make their games more accessible, she also worked with Scope to develop its 2021 Power Up and Play event, has spoken in an EGX Disability in Videogames panel, and much more.

When I ask how she got into the industry, her immediate answer is “with great difficulty”. Her first job did not go well. “There’s a lot of stigma around being disabled, especially in the games industry,” Frayling is autistic, has been diagnosed with ADHD, and also has fibromyalgia and non-epileptic attack disorder.

“I didn’t feel comfortable disclosing the needs that I had. I wasn’t very confident at the time either,” she continues. “I think it’s important that people know that sometimes, your first games job does not work out, and that’s absolutely fine. It doesn’t mean you’re terrible.” Some time in retail work helped build her confidence and social skills.

This false start didn’t stop Frayling from being included in an EGX panel in 2018 via some social media networking, which afforded her weight in the industry and led to her working with Playground Games during its accessibility design sprint of the same year. She is currently part of the team at the accessibility-focused Many Cats Studios.

You may think that accessibility is all about breaking down barriers that disability can throw up, but Frayling is keen to stress that this is only part of it.

“If you’ve changed the volume of a sound in a game,” she explains, “you have used an accessibility setting. Accessibility is just customising your experience to make the game playable for you. It just so happens that accessibility primarily and more impactfully helps disabled people access games.”

SETTING COMFORTABLY

Frayling studied game development, which sometimes offers an advantage in her role as accessibility consultant (“I have some of the language and the terminology [...] I know specifically what can be changed”). There’s also a golden rule for hiring such consultants that devs would do well to follow.

“The earlier you get your consultants in, the less cost to the company to fix everything to make it more accessible later,” she says, following this up with an encouraging observation. “Sometimes we’ll come across teams, and they’ll be interested, they’ll want to learn more; but you’ll see a change where they’ll go from ‘I’m interested in this’ from a sort of academic sort of thing, to [being] passionate about it, and that starts to spread throughout companies. Clients that have that kind of attitude tend to do better in terms of implementing accessibility.”

Frayling’s speciality is something that many of us will be all too familiar with: “Most of my advice is related to information overload. Games are notorious for it. The advice I give to everyone I work with, is to think about the kind of information that you’re giving a player [...] how much of that information is information you want the player to have, and how much of that information does the player need, because there’s a big difference between the two.”

She mentions screen reader support as something that more games could benefit from, to support people with low or zero vision. She mentions an example of an accessibility consultant colleague who goes by the name Sightless Combat, who was able to play *The Last of Us 2* on a high difficulty thanks to such features.

“A lot of the work I do is to try and normalise this idea that everybody benefits from games’ accessibility. I think that’s a really important thing for how the industry can think about accessibility, and even gamers to think about what that means.” ■

Luke Kemp

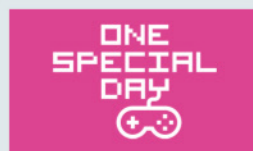
HELPING HANDS

Charities championing accessibility in games



AUTISTICA

A UK charity working with game companies to make the industry more inclusive.



SPECIALEFFECT

Prominent charity that organises events and works to allow people with disabilities to enjoy games.



EVERYONE CAN

This charity offers workshops, gaming sessions, and assistive technology assessments.

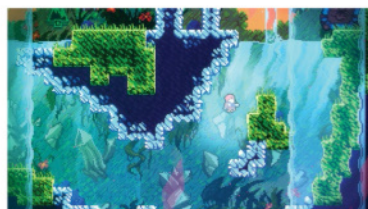


ABLEGAMERS

A US charity that works with both developers and players, whose work includes education.



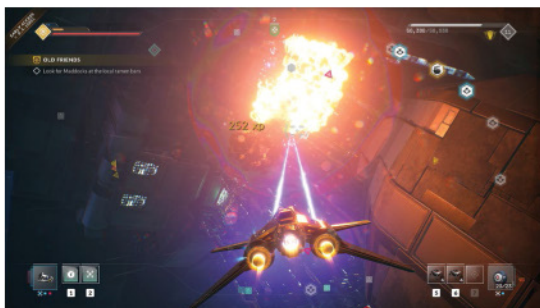
**“MOST OF MY ADVICE
IS RELATED TO
INFORMATION OVERLOAD”**



ABOVE: *The Last of Us Part I* features accessibility presets, as well as customisable features.

LEFT: *Forza Horizon 5* has been widely praised for its wide-ranging accessibility options.

3 months



EVERSPACE 2

DEVELOPER April 6, 2023 | **PUBLISHER** Rockfish Games

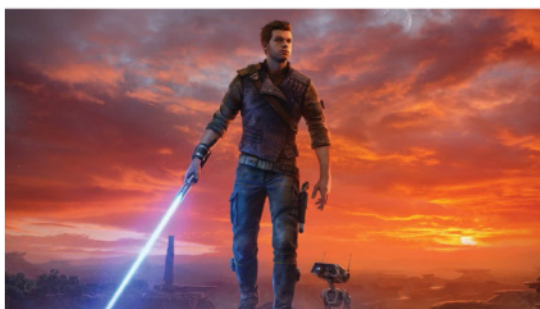
What promises to be a new gold standard for space shooters, *Everspace 2* leaves Early Access after two years of development. Fire up the laser cannons.



STAR TREK: RESURGENCE

DEVELOPER May 2023 | **PUBLISHER** Dramatic Labs

The delayed Star Trek narrative adventure game from former Telltale designers is finally set to finally arrive this April. Set phasers to stun!

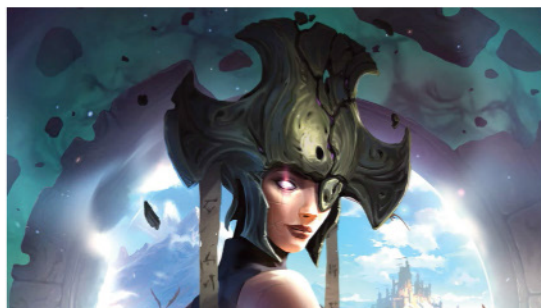


STAR WARS JEDI: SURVIVOR

DEVELOPER April 28, 2023 | **PUBLISHER** Respawn Entertainment

Cal Kestis returns after the events of *Star Wars Jedi: Outcast* equipped with new powers, Lightsabers and, excitingly, rideable mounts too.

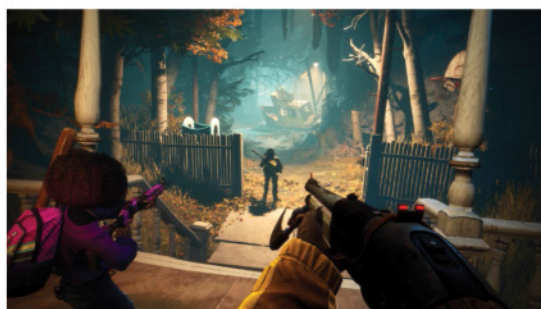
6 months



AGE OF WONDERS 4

DEVELOPER May 2, 2023 | **PUBLISHER** Triumph Studios

The venerable *Age of Wonders* series returns for more epic 4X strategy and turn-based tactical combat. Control and grow your faction in a magical realm.



REDFALL

DEVELOPER May 2, 2023 | **PUBLISHER** Arkane Austin

The co-op open-world FPS vampire slay-'em-up from Arkane, the talented studio behind *Dishonored* and *Deathloop*, promises slick combat and visuals.



DIABLO IV

DEVELOPER June 6, 2023 | **PUBLISHER** Blizzard

The beloved action-RPG series returns once more with a darker look, plenty of exciting classes to play as and, hopefully, no auction house.

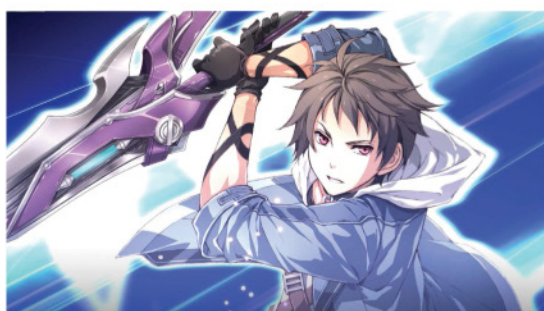
9 months



FINAL FANTASY XVI

DEVELOPER June 22, 2023 | PUBLISHER Square Enix

Final Fantasy returns once more with gamers slipping into the shoes of Clive Rosfield during his adventures in Valisthea. Chocobos will be ridden.



THE LEGEND OF HEROES: TRAILS INTO REVERIE

DEVELOPER July 7, 2023 | PUBLISHER Nihon Falcom, PH3 GmbH

The climatic chapter of the *The Legend of Heroes* series allows gamers to switch between the three main characters' stories at any time. JRPG cool.

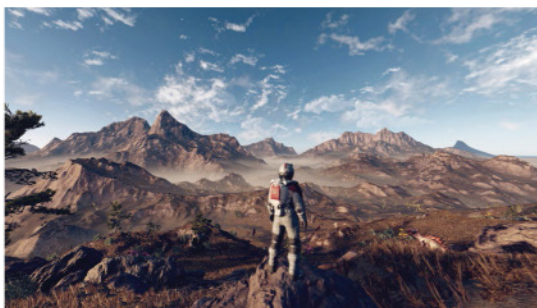


BALDUR'S GATE 3

DEVELOPER August 31, 2023 | PUBLISHER Larian Studios

The legendary fantasy RPG returns in the hands of Larian Studios, the talented chaps behind the *Divinity: Original Sin* games. Minsc and Boo confirmed!

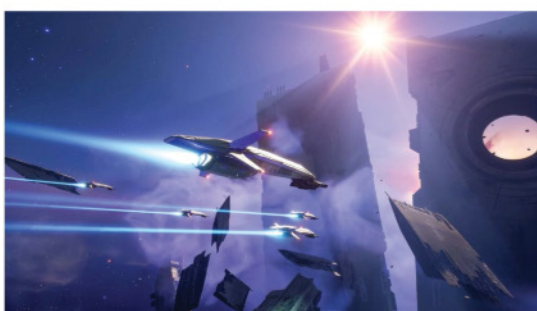
12 months+



STARFIELD

DEVELOPER 2023 | PUBLISHER Bethesda Game Studios

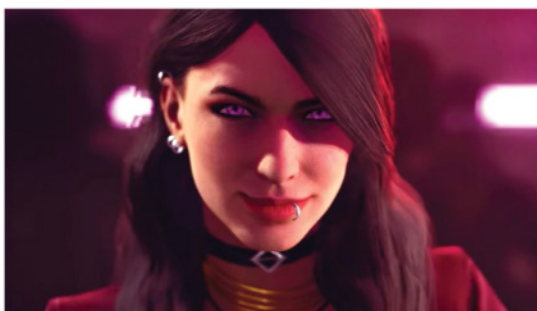
'*Skyrim* in space' sure sounds like a mighty fine idea for a videogame, and it sure has been a while since Bethesda last released a new single-player RPG. So, fingers crossed.



HOMEWORLD 3

DEVELOPER 2023 | PUBLISHER Gearbox Software

The venerable 3D real-time space strategy *Homeworld* series returns in 2023, picking up the story after the events of the two previous games.



VAMPIRE: THE MASQUERADE - BLOODLINES 2

DEVELOPER 2023 | PUBLISHER Paradox Interactive

With its original developer binned off in 2021, the current state of *Bloodlines 2* remains a mystery. Could the RPG return from the dead this year?



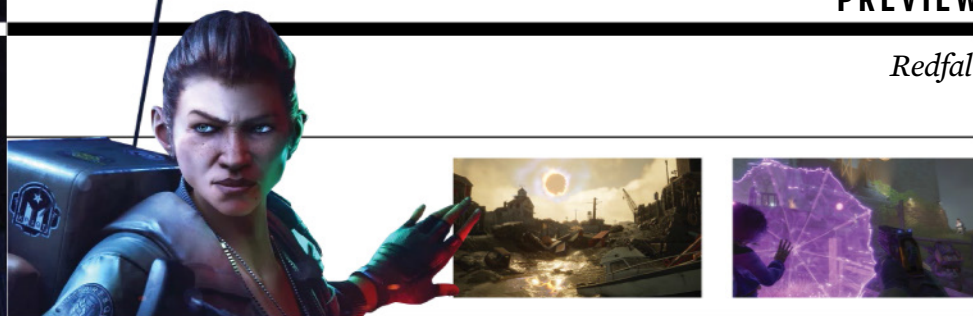
ENHANCED

HOGWARTS LEGACY

There may be no official DLC plans for *Hogwarts Legacy*, but there are a wide variety of unofficial mods for the game, ranging from added hair options, a smaller UI and enhanced performance, to a rideable Shrek broomstick.

PREVIEW





NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
May 2, 2023

DEVELOPER
Arkane Austin

PUBLISHER
Bethesda Softworks

LINK
bethesda.net/en/game/redfall

REDFALL

Arkane's co-op vampire shooter feels pale and drained

Arriving to play 90 minutes of *Redfall*, I'm surprised to find out I won't be getting to try it out in co-op. Everything leading up to launch seems to have emphasised this as an experience to be shared, your team of four combining their vampire-hunting abilities and specialities to fight back against the forces of darkness.

Before I start, however, creative director Harvey Smith assures me that it's designed as much for solo as multiplayer – you can play it however you want. It's just a different experience, he explains: alone or as a pair, it's a little slower and more strategic, whereas with three or four it's fast-paced and chaotic.

But by the end of my session, I'm left worried that that doesn't ring true. I think the unfortunate reality may be that *Redfall* is caught between two identities – lacking something when played alone, but not well suited for playing with friends either.

After picking one of the four heroes, I head straight out into the open world. *Redfall's* setting is an island in Massachusetts, a slice of small-town Americana somewhat spoiled by an invasion of vampires and their minions. Not only have they seemingly wiped out the population, they're warping the world around them – the river has dried up, the sky is an unsettling colour, and weird energies shimmer around their lairs.

It's a sharply rendered world, but from a studio as stylish as Arkane it does feel

like it's missing something. *Deathloop* and particularly *Dishonored* are wonderfully striking to look at, with such rich environmental world-building – their settings are immediately memorable. *Redfall* feels mundane by comparison. Despite the vampire threat, predominantly what you're looking at is normal, present day buildings and streets, and the art style, though colourful and pleasant, isn't distinctive enough to elevate them.

BLOOD SIMPLE

As I start to explore, that feeling is compounded by the strange lifelessness of the town. Before my session, Smith is keen to emphasise that I don't have to follow the main plot – I can just wander and see what I discover. But when I give that a try, what I find is... not a lot. There are little groups of enemies standing around in various spots, ready to come after me if I stray too close, but there's precious little to really interact with. Almost all the buildings I poke around inside are simply bare. No items to pick up, nothing to see, no signs of life other than bloodsuckers and cultists.

Eventually I discover a Nest – a sort of pocket dimension where vampires like to chill. Just the presence of the weird doorway to this realm empowers enemies around it, making it a good idea to get rid of any you find. You do that by stepping in, blasting away the monsters inside, and destroying the creepy giant heart at their centre.

The topsy-turvy world inside the Nest feels like a glimpse at that more creative and exuberant side of Arkane. It's a sort of twisted reflection of the town – shadowy streets and buildings crushed together into a claustrophobic tunnel to the heart. Once I reach the huge, abominable organ, I have to break its tendrils away from unfortunate victims being drained of their vital fluids, before blasting it into a cloud of red smoke. Then it's a race to Hoover up loot before the dimension collapses, throwing me back out to the real world.

It's a great concept – a sort of nightmarish take on clearing out bandit camps. But in practice these Nest excursions are lacking in excitement. After pretty easily blasting three or so vampires, I'm free to just stroll up to the heart, where no climactic confrontation awaits me – I

PLAYED
IT

THE ART STYLE, THOUGH COLOURFUL AND PLEASANT, ISN'T DISTINCTIVE ENOUGH



✖ just have to go to each tendril and press a button, then shoot the heart a couple of times, and that's it.

This is the problem I have throughout – there's nothing here to get my adrenaline flowing. In combat, the shooting feels good, and there's a nice selection of guns to choose from (including more esoteric options like a stake launcher and a UV beam), but enemies don't put up an interesting fight, and there seems to be little strategic meat. There's stealth, and you can approach enemy encampments from different angles, but none of it really adds up to much more depth than shooting explosive barrels when cultists stand conveniently next to them.

SO LONG, SUCKERS

The vampires are the worst offenders. Floating menacingly in the air and rushing at me to claw me, they at first seem thrilling – but once I pump a few shotgun blasts into them, I realise how weightless they really are. Easy to put down, feral in their behaviour, and usually found just kind of aimlessly hanging about with cultists, they have none of the grandeur or menace you want from a supernatural foe like this. They feel more like flying attack dogs. Once downed with a few shots, they flop helplessly to the ground, where you have to stake them to finish them off. It should be a cathartic moment – take that, you creature of the night! – but they're such limp enemies that it feels more like having to clean up after yourself.

The whole game really hangs on the idea that these guys are both scary and exciting to fight, and from what I play they just aren't. My last hope for an adrenaline rush is the anger of the vampire gods – as you slay bloodsuckers, the game regularly informs you that you're annoying their deities, which slowly fills up a big red bar. Take a break, and it'll drain slowly (though I have no idea what you'd spend that time doing), but keep fighting and it'll eventually summon a miniboss to put you down.

When I incur their wrath and a hulking beast called the Rook is summoned to slay me, it's at the worst possible time – I've just arrived at the mansion housing my first proper story mission, and it's

already well-defended. His arrival is heralded by arcane storms, forcing me to stay on the move.

CHECK MATE

As I sprint around the mansion's grounds, dodging lightning bolts and vampires while I try to get a read on the Rook, it briefly seems like I've found the real meat of the game. A couple of tentative shots reveal a health bar that's certainly not going to go down as quickly as his chums', and his claws deal serious damage.

But the more I fight him, the more I realise he's just another attack dog, only with more health and damage. He's still capable of nothing more than charging at me, then floating gormlessly around when he misses. It just takes longer to chip him down, and if this is the extent of the dark gods' divine judgement, then I don't think I'll be converting.

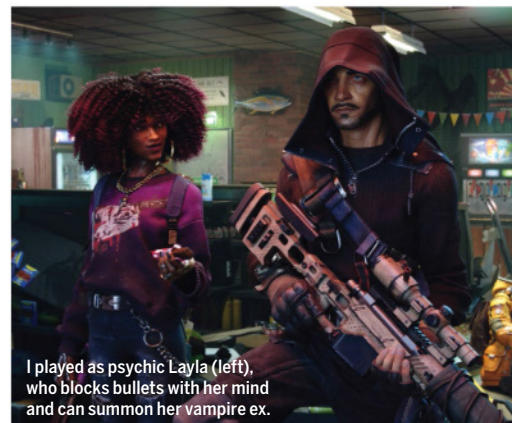
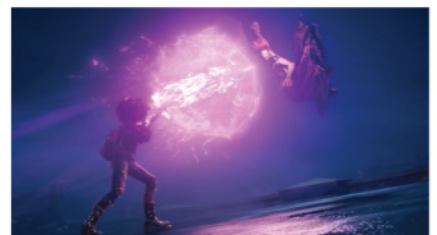
Deflated, I work my way through a fairly bland story mission. It's mostly a hunt for a long list of items in the mansion, and makes stealth or strategy irrelevant because I end up having to clear out every room. There's no climactic moment when I find the last object – and even the writing feels half-hearted as it spins me a tropey yarn about a scientist driven to unethical experiments by his daughter's mysterious illness.

As I end my time with the game, I'm left wondering how much my adventure was hobbled by a lack of co-op buddies. With enemy numbers and difficulty scaled up, would fights feel more dangerous and exciting? Would our abilities open up more strategic options? Would multiplayer chaos fill the strange emptiness?

At the same time, I can already see the problems I'd be running into in co-op. Will multiplayer sessions feel loose and aimless? Without properly paced encounters and climactic moments, how can co-op play settle into a satisfying rhythm? *Redfall* feels quiet and empty alone, but I'm not sure it's a world I'm keen to pull my friends into either.

Developed during the pandemic and other change and upheaval at the studio, and surely shaped by Arkane's struggle to find mainstream commercial success with its excellent immersive sims, *Redfall* seems to me to bear the scars of a troubled development. I can only hope I didn't get to see its best side, but all I can say is that after an hour and a half with its vampire enemies, not once did it get my blood pumping.

Robin Valentine



I played as psychic Layla (left), who blocks bullets with her mind and can summon her vampire ex.

IF THIS IS THE EXTENT OF THE DARK GODS' JUDGEMENT, THEN I WON'T BE CONVERTING



ABOVE: I didn't get much intro to the backstory, but its tale of psychic vampires created by a corporation's science experiments feels muddled.

LEFT: Esoteric weapons like the stake launcher and flare gun are fun to mess with, but pretty much everything dies after a few assault rifle headshots.



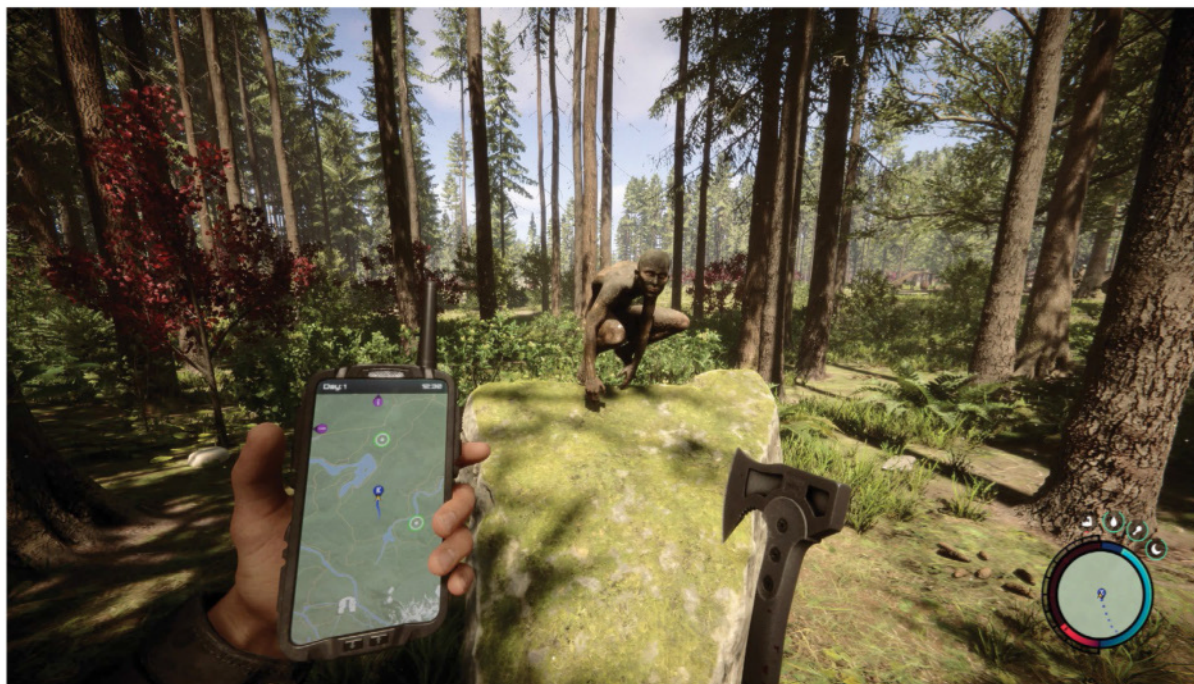
PREVIEW

Sons of the Forest



ABOVE: Mods can let you have an army of Kelvins. Cool.

RIGHT: The locals are curious. At best.





NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE

Out now (Early Access)

DEVELOPER

Endnight Games

PUBLISHER

Newnight

LINK

bit.ly/3memyRv

SONS OF THE FOREST

The Early Access survival game that gives you a friend to play with

Stop me if you've heard this before: you're stranded on a mysterious island... but you're not alone. Usually that statement is meant to spark fear, but in *Sons of the Forest* it's actually good news. The Early Access survival game has a killer feature: it comes packaged with a best friend.

I never played much of 2014's *The Forest* – I like survival games, but I'm not a big fan of horror, and *The Forest*'s creepy cannibals and their deep, dark caves felt like a nightmare. "No thanks," I thought the first time one clubbed me unconscious and dragged me into the pitch-blackness of their subterranean lair. I'll stick with survival games where bears and wolves and stomach parasites are trying to kill me, rather than ones where weird, loin cloth-wearing lunatics are trying to abduct me.

TREE SURGEON

I figured I'd feel the same about *Sons of the Forest*, the follow-up to Endnight Games' first survival game, but I'm slowly realising it's actually a fun and often goofy hang-out game, a place to spend time with a friend building a base, crafting gear, exploring the world and, yes, having a few fun frights and jump scares in the dark woods and deep caves. And I'm realising this because I'm playing with Kelvin, the AI-controlled companion *Sons of the Forest* sends along on the ride with you.

PLAYED IT

In *Sons of the Forest* you're a search-and-rescue operative dispatched to a huge, mysterious island to locate a missing billionaire and his family. Unfortunately you're in a helicopter, which as every other videogame in history has shown us, only exists to be shot down in a cutscene. You survive the crash, but for once, you're not alone. Kelvin, one of your squad members, has also survived, though he's lost his hearing and in general seems a bit doozy.

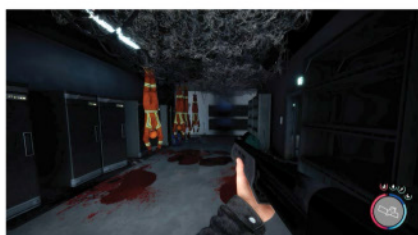
But don't let his blank look and dazed expression fool you. Kelvin is brilliant. His eager nod as you hold up some written instructions for him on a notepad, his brisk, scuttling walk as he heads out to gather fish or chop down trees for you, and his happy thumbs-up when he's completed a task, makes him an instantly endearing partner in survival.

Kelvin does have his quirks. Ask him to gather logs and he'll take an axe to nearby trees, oblivious to whether one of them contains the treehouse you've just spent an hour building. At one point I asked him to deliver a log to me and he hurled it directly into my face, damaging my health. Ask him to build a campfire and he might build it, you know, in a river. Kelvin isn't entirely a genius. But it's impossible to be disappointed or cross with him. He's just too darn lovable.

He's a bit cowardly in the face of danger, but that can actually be helpful too: if you see him sprinting away you know something terrible is about to happen, and I once spotted him crouching with his hands over his head outside our cabin... which let me know there was cannibal inside it. He's not combat ready, but he can let you know when you should be.

Survival games usually contain a lot of back-breaking work, and Kelvin makes that much easier. But more importantly he's a genuinely welcome companion, especially for those who don't do a lot of online gaming and want a bit of company. (Heck, you can even install a mod that allows you to add multiple Kelvins to your game to feel like you've got an entire crew of friendly helpers.) After spending a few hours with Kelvin, it's gonna be hard playing any other survival game alone.

Chris Livingston



Don't forget to give him legally mandated breaks.

DON'T LET HIS BLANK LOOK AND DAZED EXPRESSION FOOL YOU. KELVIN IS BRILLIANT

Pacific Drive



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
2023DEVELOPER
Ironwood StudiosPUBLISHER
In-houseLINK
pacificdrivegame.com

PACIFIC DRIVE

The star of this is your quirky customisable car

One of the best things about being a fan of survival games is that they're not all about chopping down trees and hunting rabbits with a bow and arrow. Survival games span all sorts of different genres – horror games, shooters, crafting sandboxes, city builders, colony sims. So... how about a driving game?

If there's a single upcoming survival game that's really captured my interest by swerving into another genre, it's *Pacific Drive*, the first-person 'driving survival game' from Ironwood Studios due out later this year. In *Pacific Drive* your car is your best friend and your only companion, and you steer it deep into a restricted area of the Pacific Northwest known as the exclusion zone, which has fallen into chaos due to bizarre government experiments.

Since the first teaser trailer for *Pacific Drive* last year, I've been dying to know more about it. My wish finally came true in February as Ironwood Studios revealed more about its game during a hands-off demo, giving me a longer look at the mysterious and violent exclusion zone, the intimidating anomalies you'll have to contend with, the trusty station wagon you'll use to navigate them, and the garage that serves as your home base.

DRIVE TO SURVIVE

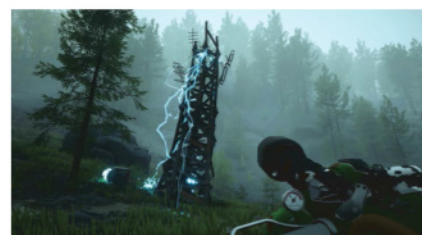
Pacific Drive is a run-based roguelite (or "road-lite" as the developer calls it). Starting in your garage at the edge of the zone, you pick a location on your map,

explore it in your car, hop out to walk around on foot and gather resources, and then return home to resupply and make repairs and modifications to your wagon before your next run. More locations appear the deeper you travel into the zone, and the map at your base eventually becomes a network of routes, discovered locations and areas of interest labelled with ever-intriguing question marks.

And it looks absolutely wild out there in the exclusion zone. Even in just the one location I saw during the preview, on a map that was about 1km in size, the anomalies were coming at the brave little car nearly non-stop. There are floating boulders that can be rammed out of the way with your bumper, upheavals from the pavement that pop up like jagged stone bollards, gravitational warps that send your car sailing through the air, crackling electrical barriers that disrupt your electronics, magnetic creatures that try to pull your car off the road and jagged metal monsters that latch onto your car and start chewing on it.

As far as dealing with these threats, putting the pedal to the metal and weaving around them typically looks like your best bet, but there are plenty of times you'll need to get out of your car and handle things up-close and on foot. You'll need to repair the damage your car has sustained with a blowtorch, swap flat tyres with the spares in your trunk, and cut off the jagged entities chomping on your car by using an enormous handheld buzzsaw. All this might be happening during a tremendous thunderstorm, in pitch blackness during a spooky dark night, or while more anomalies are bearing down on you. It all looks extremely tense.

That same saw can be used to harvest scrap metal from other wrecked vehicles you come across. And be careful while you're out there carving up those wrecks. During the demo, the member of Ironwood Studios playing the game opened the boot of a rusty, run-down car and there was something hiding in it. One of those jagged entities, called a 'dust bunny', popped out of the trunk and went sailing toward the station wagon, attached itself to the roof, and began gnawing at the metal. It had to be cut off with the buzzsaw before it did too much damage.



YOU'LL NEED TO REPAIR THE DAMAGE YOUR CAR HAS SUSTAINED WITH A BLOWTORCH



ABOVE: The woods are hiding plenty of secrets.

LEFT: Sci-fi gadgets will upgrade your ride.

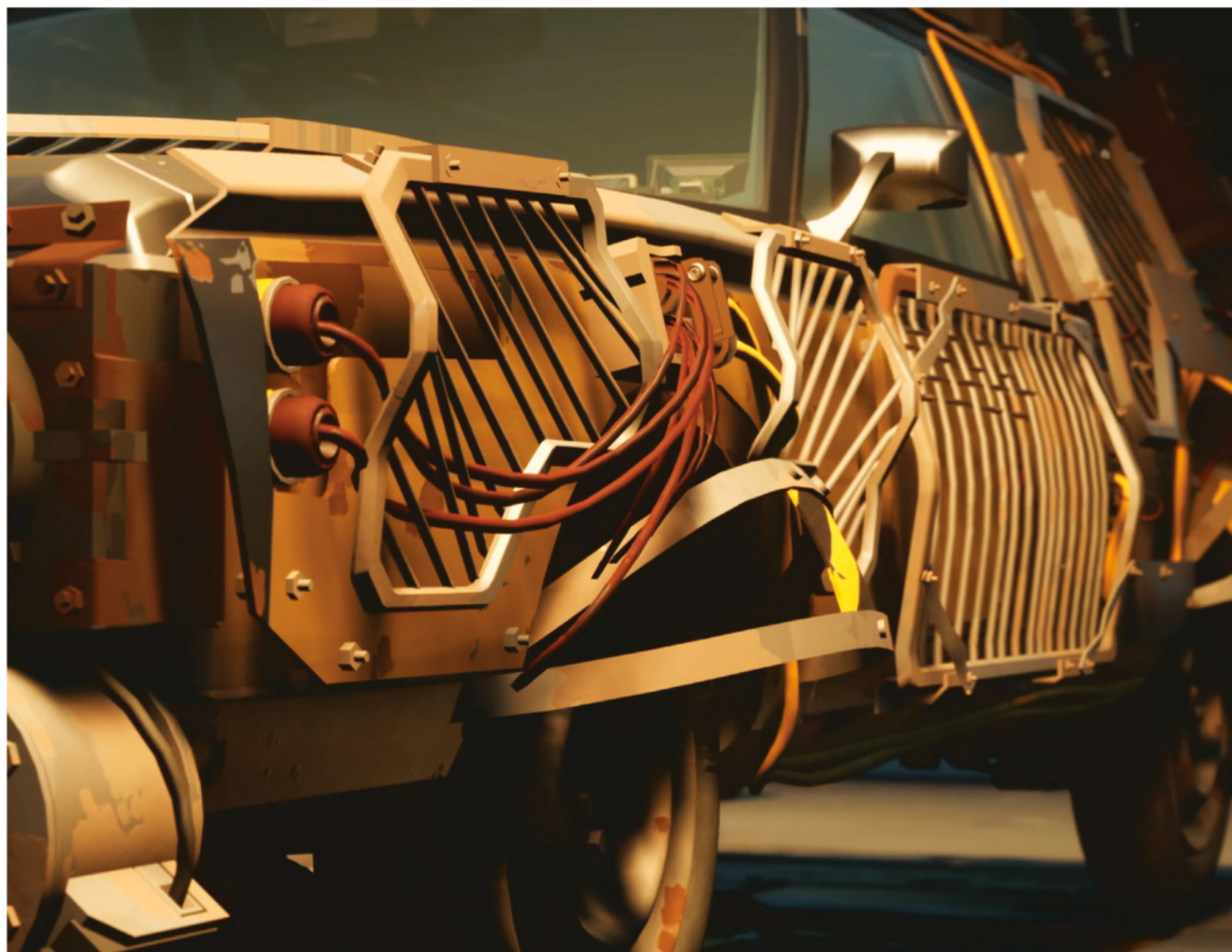


PREVIEW

Pacific Drive

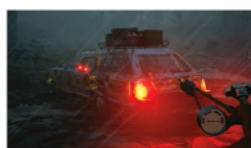
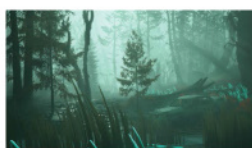
RIGHT: Electrical anomalies are just one of the dangers.

BELOW: Some extra armour won't hurt.





Customising your car looks like lots of fun.



As you carefully leave your car and investigate small, rundown buildings like gas stations, you'll discover new crafting recipes and blueprints you can use to make your car more effective at exploring the zone. And to piece the story of the zone together you'll find notes, audio logs and even communicate with other characters who will help you with your ultimate goal: to find an escape from the bizarre landscape you're trapped in.

The world isn't one big open-world map, but is broken into chunks. And when you're done checking out exploring a portion of the map you return to your garage by finding an 'anchor' – a power source that can open a gateway to teleport you back to your base.

The cool thing about these gateways is that they don't appear right in front of you, but open up elsewhere on the map, the location made visible by a giant skybeam in the distance. And boy, does opening a gateway make the zone angry. A storm builds up around the map and then closes in, similar to the closing circle in a battle royale. Exiting the zone is a race against time, as you speed through the hostile weather and angry anomalies with the crimson storm closing in on you from all sides. It looks terrifically exciting.

HOME SWEET HOME

The other half of *Pacific Drive*, and one that looks almost as much fun as racing a station wagon through the apocalypse, takes place in your home base, the charmingly dingy and cluttered garage where you can work on your car. Convert resources into scrap metal, make repairs, craft and attach upgrades, and deck out your wagon with extra armour, a spotlight on the roof and sci-fi gizmos to make the next run safer and more effective.

The possibilities look nearly endless – I got to see the car covered with gadgets, armour, roof racks, bits of new structural support, sturdier tyres, glowing hubcaps, improved fuel tanks and storage, and all sorts of other chunky bits and bobs.

Fiddling with your station wagon in the garage looks weirdly relaxing, and in the preview I saw the developer pull almost the entire car apart, piece by piece, removing the bonnet, doors, lights, and

grille, and then put it all back together again. But cobbling upgrades onto your car isn't the only thing you'll do in your garage. At certain times you might realise your car is acting strangely, and you'll need to diagnose why.

QUIRKY CARS

My first car was a 1981 Plymouth Horizon hatchback, and as with most clunky old used cars it had its share of quirks. For one, if I turned on the air vents while it was snowing, snow would actually come blasting from the vents, giving me a mini-blizzard inside the car. And the door handles kept failing, one by one, until the only way I could enter the car was through the rear passenger door. It made for an embarrassing way to pick up dates and take them to dinner.

Your station wagon in *Pacific Drive* will develop quirks as well, due to exposure to the exclusion zone. These quirks sound far more severe than the ones my old Plymouth used to have, but in *Pacific Drive* you have the option to diagnose and fix them while tinkering in your garage. I asked the team at Ironwood Studios what sort of quirks the station wagon in *Pacific Drive* can become stricken with. While they weren't sure which quirks would be in the finished game, they were willing to tell me about some they had experimented with during development.

"There was one where your horn honked when you turned your wheel," says Alex Dracott, Ironwood Studios founder and creative director. "That was one you fixed really quickly."

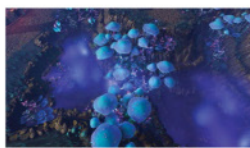
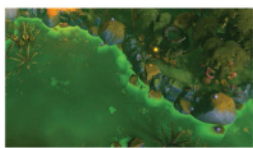
"I love when [the quirks] chain together," says Seth Rosen, lead gameplay designer. "So you could have: your horn honks when you turn the wheel. And you could have: when your horn honks, your door falls off."

"We're still in the stage where we're experimenting, so I can't promise those examples will ship," Rosen says. "But we're having fun with the modular approach of having conditions and behaviours and smashing those together, and being surprised ourselves by what shakes out from that."

The brief preview of *Pacific Drive* has me more eager than ever to sit behind the wheel of that wagon and speed through the zone, and also to unwind in the garage while tinkering with my ride. Unfortunately we still don't know the release date other than the vague '2023'. I'll try to keep my doors on in the meantime.

Christopher Livingston

FIDDLING WITH YOUR STATION WAGON IN THE GARAGE LOOKS WEIRDLY RELAXING



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
2023DEVELOPER
Realmforge StudiosPUBLISHER
Kalypso MediaLINK
kalypsomedia.com

DUNGEONS 4

Rule the underworld with a floating iron fist

The last time you heroically rampaged through a dungeon, killing goblins and looting treasure chests of every last gold coin, did you even give a moment's thought to the unfortunate, hard-working evil Overlord who spent ages building and managing that dungeon? I doubt it. Heroes rarely do.

Well, this year you'll gain a new perspective on those underground lairs filled with orcs, ogres and scrabbling imps. Try being the boss in *Dungeons 4*, with all the management decisions and hordes of creatures to direct and gold-hungry invaders, and you're bound to start sympathising with the darker side.

It's been nearly six years since you last ruled the underworld with a floating fist in *Dungeons 3*, building and managing a labyrinthine lair and leading an assortment of monsters into the overworld to crush mobs of so-called heroes. *Dungeons 4*, which I played while in closed beta, feels pretty familiar to earlier *Dungeons* games, but at the same time it's adding some new twists to both the underworld management and overworld combat.

DWARF FORTRESS

The first problem you'll need to contend with are dwarves. Making their first appearance in the *Dungeons* series, dwarves are just what you'd expect: hale and hearty types whose lust for treasure and penchant for underground dwelling is just as strong as yours. As you direct your

imps to start chipping away at stone walls, establishing different chambers for treasure hoarding, crafting, evil generation and monster-raising, those dwarves are never far off. And they're just as busy as you are, creating their own subterranean stronghold as you build yours.

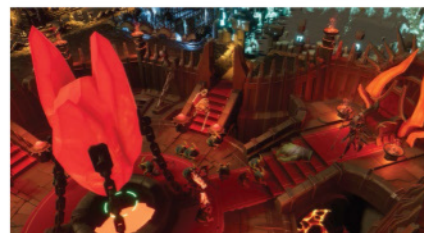
The underworld of *Dungeons 4* is, impressively, roughly four times the size it was in the last game. Still, it's only a matter of time before it starts feeling crowded. I quickly built a treasure room with an enormous gold block at its centre, and had imps chipping away at it as showers of gold coins fell around the chamber in piles. I built a barracks for what I planned to be a sizeable army of monsters, first adopting a towering orc and then a massive slithering snake. I'd also set up a crafting room to begin fabricating traps. But that's when the dwarves began to arrive.

Their busy mining had led right to my evil HQ, and they burst through the wall before I could lay down even a single trap. Luckily, my green brutes managed to defeat them and I was able to start setting up defences of spike traps and spinning blades at the dwarves' entrance, while quickly trying to research even deadlier machines.

I didn't get as much time in the overworld portions of *Dungeons 4*, but its RTS combat also felt familiar as I led swarms of evil creatures to wipe out mobs of heroes, activating special abilities for extra damage and utterly shattering castle defences and city gates. Thalya, your evil captain and right-hand woman (especially since you don't have a left hand) is back, and this time she has unlockable perks to use in battle, like the power to make enemies explode and damage others nearby. We even took on her do-gooder brother in the introduction, though in defeat he managed to slip away, no doubt for a final showdown at the end of the campaign.

For how much bigger *Dungeons 4* is than 3, it all ran very smoothly in the beta, both above ground and below. I did find an occasional imp had gotten stuck, but thankfully, I could swing my giant floating hand around, snatch it up, and plop it down exactly where I needed him. That's just one perk of being an evil boss.

Christopher Livingston



THE FIRST PROBLEM YOU'LL NEED TO CONTEND WITH ARE DWARVES



ABOVE: Overworld combat is more chaotic than ever.

LEFT: Create the dungeon of your evil dreams.

PREVIEW

Age of Wonders 4





NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
May 2, 2023

DEVELOPER
Triumph Studios

PUBLISHER
Paradox Interactive

LINK
paradoxinteractive.com

AGE OF WONDERS 4

Living my best life as an evil froggy wizard

Triumph Studios' 4X can't help but generate fun fantasy adventures. My 4X obsession has left me a little burned out when it comes to the genre's four big pillars, but I keep coming back for more to feed a single, specific fantasy: crafting a society and watching it grow. So far, *Age of Wonders 4* is doing a great job of feeding this hunger.

Triumph Studio's fantasy 4X has a little bit of *Stellaris* in it. The shared DNA is seen most clearly at the start, when you fashion your baby empire. Like *Age of Wonders 3*, you'll create a heroic or villainous avatar to lead your forces, selecting their race, fiddling with aesthetics and picking their starting loadout, but you'll also build the society they rule.

First off is their physical form, ranging from orcs and elves to rats and moles. This gives you some starting traits, but these can be swapped for others so that you can pick your species' aesthetic without being locked into traits you don't fancy. Then you choose their culture. Are they feudal? Industrious? Barbarians? Finally you pick a pair of society traits, perhaps making them devotees of good or gifted casters.

CREATING A MONSTER

Together, all of these choices stack up to create a large number of effects, defining how your empire functions, as well as determining its alignment – good, evil or neutral – and affinity, both of which will dictate how other empires and free cities

react to you. It's a lot of big choices before you've even started spreading across the map, but through *AoW4*'s myriad progression systems, from magical tomes to the empire development tree, there are plenty of ways to shore up any weaknesses you might discover.

My custom empire was a devouring swarm of cannibal rats who liked to munch on corpses to heal themselves in battle. They were ruled over by an evil, froggy wizard king with a penchant for frying enemies with lightning. Driven by their ruler's thirst for knowledge, one of the themes I went with was dark magic, selecting the Dark tome for my first book of magic. That allowed me to curse my foes, while giving my own warriors with the ability to do more damage to enemies with negative status effects.

AoW4's spells are wide-ranging things, capable of not just turning the tide of the turn-based battles, but also improving cities and provinces, as well as enchanting units. Enchantments are *AoW4*'s take on upgrades, giving your armies permanent bonuses and often changing their appearance. So your armies might eventually charge into battle with giant frost spikes sticking out of their backs, or maybe you'll turn your empire into undead monstrosities.

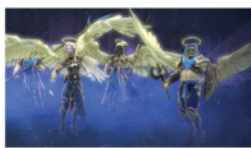
While other empires are trying to conquer the world or becoming masters of magic alongside you, they are only one small part of the lively maps you'll explore. Punctuating these kaleidoscopic lands are resource nodes that can be exploited by your settlements and hostile armies.

NEW BOSS

These armies are usually occupying a node, so you'll want to wipe them out to take full advantage of it – but these encounters don't always end in combat. Instead, you'll sometimes find yourself dealing with an event with a variety of outcomes, some of them ending in battle anyway, while others might end with you actually recruiting your former foes. When a band of frost giants realised that my beefy, high-tier army was bound to crush them, they pleaded for their lives, and instead I gave them a job in my capital city, where they gave me a bonus to production at the cost of stability – tiny ratfolk do not, it turns out, want to live next door to

PLAYED IT

THEY PLEADED FOR THEIR LIVES, AND INSTEAD I GAVE THEM A JOB IN MY CITY



✦ massive monsters. They might also join your army, giving you access to units you otherwise wouldn't be able to field.

AoW4 is always spitting out events, but it happens even more frequently once you start encountering free cities. These are independent settlements which aren't playing to win, but are otherwise created from the same ingredient list that you and your opponents are formed from. And they're a chatty bunch. In one instance, I was invited to participate in a grand hunt, where I had to track down some wild hogs and butcher them, netting me a choice of several rewards, including the head of a piglet which I could display to show off my empire's supremacy. That was tempting, but instead I asked for one of the free city's elite units to bolster my army.

When you bump into a free city that isn't hostile, you can gift them with a Whispering Stone. From there, you can start seducing it into your empire, but the Whispering Stone can also serve as a spy or even syphon off tribute from another empire's vassal – as long as you've unlocked the prerequisite skill. As long as negative modifiers aren't dragging your relationship down, you'll befriend them.

FRIENDSHIP IS MAGIC

Making friends is nice and all, but what I really wanted to do was become powerful enough to tackle an Ancient Wonder. These points of interest are occupied by tough armies, and even though – if you've fulfilled the prerequisites – the challenge can be lessened somewhat, they still represent some of the game's trickiest battles. While I was sailing through most of the turn-based brawls, these ones reliably kicked the shit out of me. The attempt is always worth it, though, because of the gold and magical artefacts you'll net from victory, and they can also be annexed for some beefy bonuses.

Ancient Wonders only let you select one army to fight with, but regular fights let you bring in multiple forces, making the scraps potentially huge, bloody affairs. The battle maps themselves range wildly, from big open fields to elaborate, menacing ruins. You'll need to take into account choke points, cover and environmental hazards, as well as the

many abilities of your opponents. In low-tier fights there's still plenty to consider, but things start picking up once you field troops with more unusual abilities, like massive bone golems who deposit skeleton warriors upon death.

Sieges are a more involved type of scuffle, and my first one came about thanks to my tigran vassal. The tigran leader had a pair of daughters – one he was proud of, and another he was just weirded out by. I decided to help my buddy out and take the weirdo off his hands, making her a hero in my army. She proved to be an excellent addition, and after many turns of murdering monsters in my name, she came to me with a proposition: to help her hunt down a weapon known as Excessive Force. It was the main reason she had dreamed of a life of adventure, and she'd finally discovered its current location. Unfortunately it was locked up in a free city. This free city was a rat-infested place, but these rats were not my pals. War it was, then.

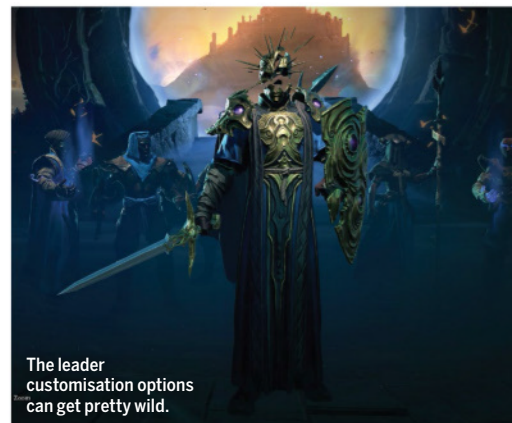
You can't just walk into a city and start a fight, though, so first I had to spend several turns chipping away at its fortifications. During this time you can also commission a siege project, if you've unlocked the ability, to undermine the enemy and make the upcoming battle a bit easier. I opted to mess up their defensive towers so they couldn't use them in the turn-based scrap. And after four turns of waiting, we got into some rat-on-rat action beneath the city's imposing walls. We crushed them, naturally, and then threw their dead leader into the crypts before raising him as an undead minion to serve me for all time.

TEAR DOWN THIS WALL

Victories like that feel more meaningful than the climactic ones, where you win the game either through conquest, magic, expansion or points. Every time I saw my hero crushing a monster with Excessive Force, I was reminded of that great battle against the rats and how it began because she had a kinda shitty dad.

Ultimately, every victory is just a small part of a tapestry that records all of your deeds, and then rewards you for them. This is represented by the Pantheon system, where points earned in your campaigns can be spent on new gear, cosmetics and whole new realms. It serves to give you a little nudge and ask, "Wouldn't you like to conquer the world one more time?" Yes, I think I might.

Fraser Brown



The leader customisation options can get pretty wild.

I REALLY WANTED TO BECOME POWERFUL ENOUGH TO TACKLE AN ANCIENT WONDER



ABOVE: Nothing better than a froggy mosh pit.

LEFT: There's no dearth of eye candy on Age of Wonders 4's map.



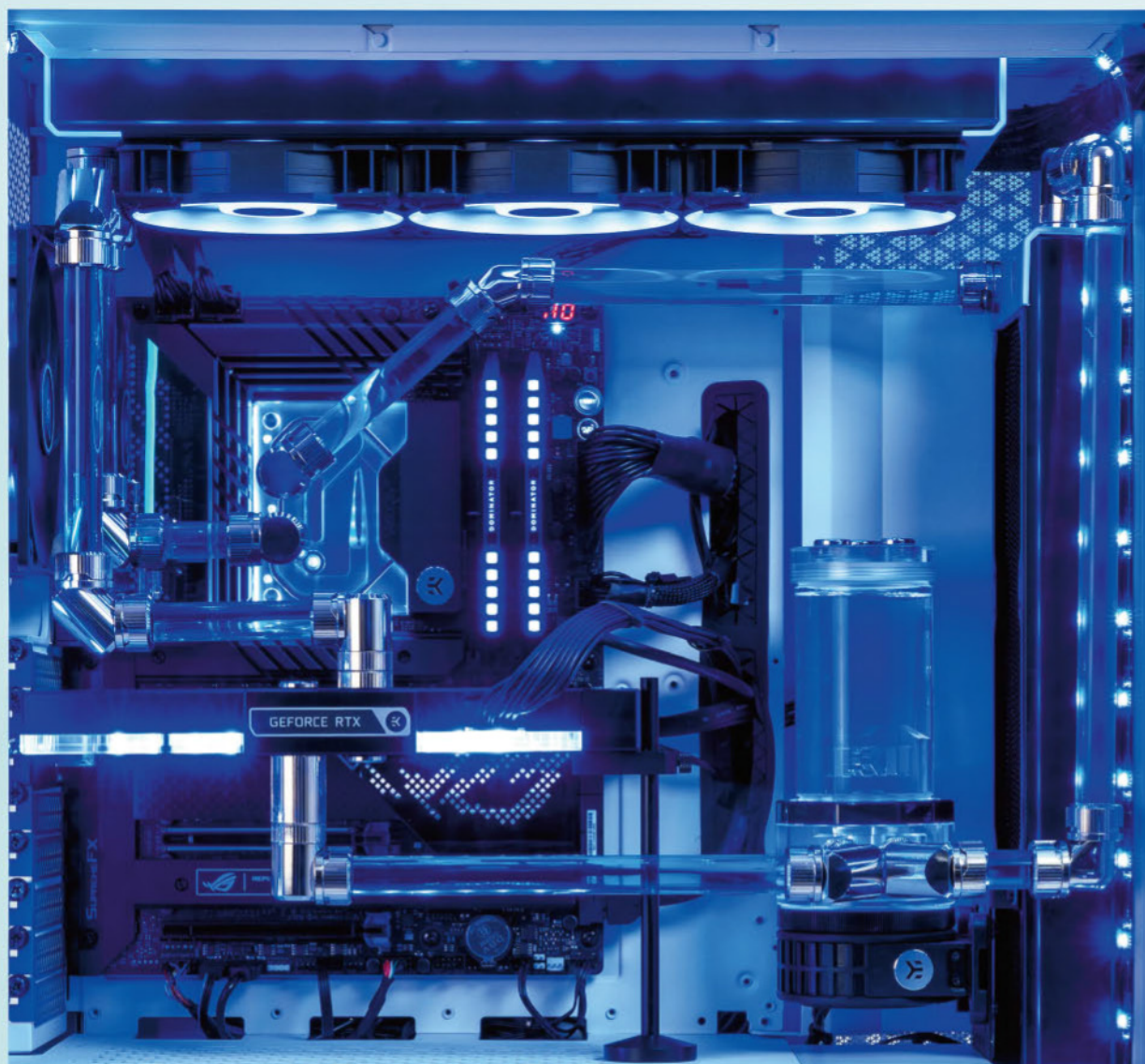
YOUR PC. YOUR WAY.

Get an exclusive **£15 DISCOUNT**
with PCGamer using code **PGA23**



LIQUIDSERIES®

WWW.PCSPECIALIST.CO.UK



PULSAR PRO

- › Intel® Core™ i7-13700KF
- › ASUS® ROG STRIX Z690-F Gaming WIFI
- › 12GB NVIDIA® GEFORCE RTX 4070 Ti
- › 32GB Corsair DOMINATOR PLATINUM 5600MHz RAM
- › 2TB SAMSUNG 990 PRO M.2 SSD
- › Windows 11 Home

Configure from

£2,570.00*



RECOIL ELITE

- › 16" 240Hz QHD Screen (100% sRGB)
- › Intel® Core™ i9 13900HX
- › NVIDIA GeForce RTX 4060 / 4070 / 4080 / 4090
- › Up to 64GB DDR5 RAM
- › 99Wh Battery
- › Windows 11 Home

Configure from

£2,300.00*



ZIRCON NOVA

- › AMD Ryzen 5 7600
- › ASUS® TUF GAMING X670E-PLUS WIFI
- › 32GB Corsair VENGEANCE 4800MHz RAM
- › 8GB AMD RADEON™ RX 6600
- › 500GB SEAGATE FireCuda 530 M.2 SSD
- › Windows 11 Home

Configure from

£1,400.00*



CUSTOM BUILT
TO YOUR SPEC



EASY TO USE
CONFIGURATOR



CUSTOM PCS
& LAPTOPS



AWARD-WINNING
SYSTEMS

CONFIGURE YOURS TODAY

WWW.PCSPECIALIST.CO.UK

      PCSpecialist

*Prices are including VAT and are correct at time of printing, but subject to change. Images are for illustration purposes only, components may differ in aesthetics and brand.



CAPTAIN'S LOG

STAR TREK: RESURGENCE

is more game, but not like we know it, captain

By Lauren Aitken

For some, the post-TNG era of Star Trek feels overused. There were several excellent films (no questions, please) and new iterations of Star Trek set in the years following the end of Captain Picard's story – including an eponymous show of his own. There are also at least a dozen games set in the TNG and post-TNG universe, including the massively successful *Star Trek Online*, but none of them really captured the true spirit of Starfleet.

It seems fitting, then, that as the cinematic universe closes on the story of Picard and the rest of the Enterprise D's crew, a new game carrying on the lore from my favourite

Star Trek: Resurgence

era emerges. Launching in May, *Star Trek: Resurgence* is set in 2380, right after the events of *Star Trek: Nemesis* and roughly 16 years after Picard, Riker and co set out on their continuing mission to explore strange new worlds.

The team at Dramatic Labs – a small group of around 30 mostly ex-Telltale employees who are self-confessed Trekkies – had a vision for a *Star Trek* game long before *Resurgence* was in development. The Telltale formula of a strong narrative combined with morally grey decision-making and plenty of QTEs seemed to fit the *Star Trek* storytelling style perfectly – *Star Trek* is, after all, historically a series weaving a complicated narrative about the wider universe.

But Dramatic Labs offers something more: intricate puzzles, stealth sequences, better cinematics, and an overall departure from the Telltale default of feeling like you're watching an interactive movie. *Resurgence* deviates further from the Telltale norm by not being episodic, rather each swap between player characters is a uniquely titled episode. As writer Andrew Grant summarised, "We wanted more game in our videogames." It's *Star Trek*, but not as we know it.

LOWER DECKS

Most *Star Trek* games have focused on the bridge and commanding officer roles, if not playing specifically as a captain or, more chaotically, as a member of the Q continuum. One of the playable characters in *Resurgence* is Jara Rydek, who serves as first officer aboard the *Resolute*. She's a kobliad, a rare species that rely on deuridium infusions to stabilise their cell structure to survive. I played her very much as a Riker-lite character, though I would also say that I've taken inspiration from Michael Burnham and her penchant for playing fast and loose with Starfleet's rules.

Star Trek Resurgence takes a modern look at what is by far the most popular era. While some filler episodes followed the stories of lower-ranking officers and ensigns,

Lower Decks was the first show to really focus on the storylines of petty officers and ensigns aboard starships. In *Resurgence*, you'll get to experience the life of the lower decks for the first time, playing as petty officer Carter Diaz. His storyline injects the familiar goofy *Star Trek* humour, but without going full Broccoli. I mean, Barclay. There's a particular Reggie-esque section where Chovak tells Carter not to be alarmed while his life is in immediate danger and Carter pulls Reggie's quintessential shocked face and simply states, "I am alarmed!"

Star Trek captains and commanding officers often make difficult decisions that trickle down to the rest of the crew, sometimes involving sacrifice for the greater good. *Resurgence* opens with that theme, with the *Resolute* having just been repaired after a catastrophic 'malfunction' at the hands of Captain Salérno. Jara joins the *Resolute* as an outsider, and is made aware straight from the off that she'll need to work hard to gain the crew's trust, but not before the captain demands absolute loyalty from her. In true *Star Trek* fashion, I opted for a more 'sure, but my loyalties are with Starfleet' approach and, needless to

say, the captain wasn't pleased.

Carter has a gentler introduction; he's part of the engineering team under engineering chief Chovak, an ultra-sarcastic Vulcan. He chums along with fellow petty officer Nili Edsilar, an unjoined Trill, and is a talented young engineer. I opted to keep a happy-go-lucky attitude with Carter as well as opting for the greater good vibe of Starfleet over personal ambitions, although I did choose to start a romance with another officer which... well, I'll get back to that.

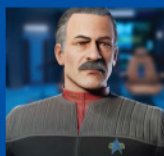
A NEW GENERATION

Partnering with Epic Games means that *Resurgence* is developed in Unreal 5, though there were a few stray *Mass Effect*-esque eyebrow raises here and there with the characters' facial animations. A little uncanny valley at times, but it takes more than a little too much side-eye to

PARTNERING WITH EPIC GAMES MEANS THAT RESURGENCE IS DEVELOPED IN UNREAL 5

MEET THE CREW *Who'll be your best pal?***COMMANDER JARA RYDEK**

Commander Rydek is the newly recruited first officer aboard the *USS Resolute*. She's a dedicated Starfleet officer and by-the-book kind of gal, and she keeps a level head in a crisis or tense diplomatic situation.

**CAPTAIN SOLANO**

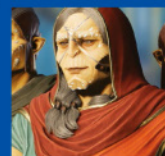
Captain Solano is a long-serving officer in Starfleet but, under his orders, the *Resolute* suffered damage and several crewmates perished as a result. He's keen to prove to Starfleet that he is a capable captain.

**PETTY OFFICER CARTER DIAZ**

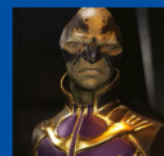
Carter Diaz is a talented engineer in the lower decks. He's charming and kind to a fault, and would do anything for his crewmates. While lower ranking, Diaz doesn't shy away from taking on dangerous jobs.

**PETTY OFFICER NILI EDSILAR**

Edsilar is an unjoined Trill and works in engineering alongside Carter. She's sharp, witty and takes no nonsense from anyone – even if that person happens to be Carter's love interest.

**THE HOTARI**

The Hotari are a hardy, rocky-skinned race that, until recently, worked in the mines under the orders of the Alydians. They've discovered an ancient technology that seems to be turning the tides in a dangerous way.

**THE ALYDIANS**

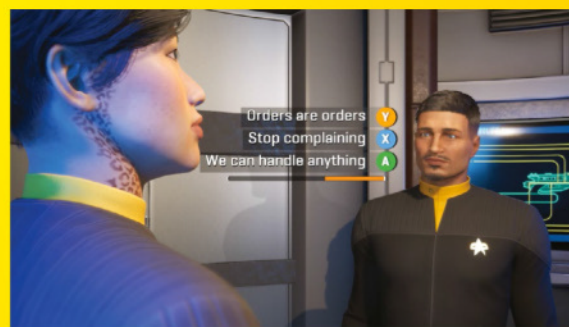
The Alydians are a militaristic race that raid the Dilithium mines on Tau. They follow a strict hierarchy. Their order is under threat now that the Hotari seek independence, which threatens their Dilithium mining resources.



TOP: Piloting a shuttle may look easy, but this is space, and everything could kill you if you don't pay attention.

LEFT: Dammit Jara I'm an engineer, not a puzzle master!





TOP: Number one, you have the bridge.

RIGHT: The chief engineer demands a certain level of logic from his crew.



» put me off Star Trek. It also premieres Dramatic Lab's proprietary narrative tool, Beanie, which interfaces with Unreal to write seemingly endless branching storylines flawlessly – imagine the cork wall with pictures and string everywhere and you've got a rudimentary idea of how Beanie works. Despite Dramatic Labs having a much smaller writing team, Beanie has allowed the writers to create an expansive, sprawling story with many complicated twists and endings to find.

I played roughly half of the latest QA build of *Star Trek: Resurgence* and went into it knowing there would still be a few bugs and issues here and there. What's a game preview without a little random invisibility or falling through the floor for no reason? Steam's controller mapping also decided it didn't want to play ball and interfered with my gameplay for much of my hands-on experience, but it didn't detract too much from the state of the game and, more importantly, the excellent universe-building that *Resurgence* has to offer.

Resurgence is a game about decision-making at its core, but there's no real option to play a renegade version of a Starfleet officer here. While some decisions appear more neutral or non-committal, the majority exist as canon Starfleet options – you can choose to take the advice of your fellow officers in an emergency or do exactly as your captain tells you or you can offer an opinion on whose side you're on in a conflict, but either way Jara and Carter remain dedicated Starfleet officers, which is something the writing team was keen to stick to. I also got to throw in a cheeky "Engage!" when commanding the helm to take flight, which obviously made the Trekkie in me happy.

ANCIENT CIVILISATION

After playing for a few hours, I was able to chat with the game's lead writer Dan Martin, writer Andrew Grant and cinematic director Kent Mudle about Dramatic Labs' vision for *Resurgence* and what creating this non-canonical story meant for them. *Resurgence* introduces two new races into the Star Trek canon: the Hotari, a rocky-faced, hardy and previously subservient race who mined on their planet's moon, Tau, and the Alydians, a tall

Kelpian/Kaminoan-looking race who are staunchly militaristic and who once seemed to control the Hotari by forcing them to work in the mines that they technically owned. Jara and the crew of the *Resolute* are tasked with arbitration between the two races as they each seek control of the mines and the dilithium within. Only, there's ancient but advanced Tkon technology at work here, and not everyone is who they say they are.

The Tkon is an ancient civilisation first mentioned in *The Last Outpost* in season one of *The Next Generation* (you know, the season with beardless Riker who sits normally on chairs.) In it, Riker is challenged by a Tkon guardian, Portal, who releases the *Enterprise* and a Ferengi ship from its grasp only once Riker defeats Portal's riddle. The episode ends with Portal stating, "I

will sleep until I'm needed again," which, for an episode that came out in 1987, was a hell of a foreshadowing.

MADE UP

While it's always fun to see familiar faces in Star Trek, I was very excited to see the two new races specifically created for

Resurgence. The universe is, after

all, filled with new worlds and civilisations, so it's only natural that a new canon is introduced to the ever-expanding lore. I chatted with Dan Martin, the lead writer for *Resurgence*, about how a departure from using established characters as playable characters was important, and why it was necessary to write a new canon, complete with a unique ship, new alien races and crew that slots into the wider Star Trek universe.

"We don't want to necessarily force the player into saying, 'This is what happens with the Romulans in the future, so I've got to play this way to make sure this thing happens,'" Martin explained, emphasising that *Resurgence* was about giving the player the choice to shape a new story over rehashing the past. He continued, "It's the same way that, if we made a game where you're playing as Jean-Luc Picard post-Nemesis, you'd be making a decision based off, 'How would Picard play this out?'"

While I would relish the opportunity to play as Picard in a new Star Trek game, merely existing in the same universe as the crew of the *Enterprise D* is enough for me. »

I WAS VERY EXCITED TO SEE THE TWO NEW RACES SPECIFICALLY CREATED FOR RESURGENCE

■ Impulse
■ Reverse
■ Steering
■ Strafe

TIMELINE *How it all goes down*



THE NEXT GENERATION
2364 – 2370
The Captain Picard and the USS *Enterprise-D* seek out new worlds and civilisations.



DOMINION WAR
2373 – 2375
The forces of the Dominion, Cardassian Union and Breen Confederacy are defeated.



NEMESIS 2379
Commander Data is lost aboard the *Scimitar* and Riker leaves with Deanna Troi to command the *Titan*.



RESURGENCE
2380
Jara Rydek and Carter Diaz are serving officers aboard the USS *Resolute*.



PICARD 2399
A retired Picard lives on his family's vineyard but is drawn back to Starfleet by new mysteries. Big TNG reunion.



STAR TREK ONLINE
2409 – 2411
The Klingons and the United Federation of planets are at war. The Borg are back.

Star Trek: Resurgence

When discussing the creation of the Hotari and Alydians, Martin describes the challenge – and fun – they had when naming them: “You want it to sound alien, but you want it to roll off the tongue and feel like it comes from a culture.” Coming up with a species name is one thing, but how do you create two races that slot seamlessly into the Star Trek universe – especially when the bulk of Star Trek’s alien appearances were the result of heavy use of prosthetics?

It’s widely known throughout the PC Gamer team that I am a Trekkie and have not once, but twice, cosplayed as a Starfleet captain. Dressing up in costumes and using prosthetics is how it was always done historically on the shows, and a little bit of the right makeup makes me look like a terrific Janeway. When speaking with cinematic director Kent Mudle, he explained the logic behind creating two races that, realistically, people could cosplay as if they wanted, “We wanted to make sure that their faces are human enough that when they emote and act, you can tell how they’re feeling in a recognisable way.

“As many of the classic Star Trek races are effectively people with varying amounts of makeup and prosthetics on, we wanted to stay within that historical legacy of the series, but still come up with something a little more fantastical than maybe you could do in live-action. So both trying to stay true to the classic style and embracing the fact that we’re making a videogame here can go a little wild.”

MORE GAMING

Going a little wild with things seems to be at the heart of this project. Many of Dramatic Labs’ team are ex-Telltale veterans, and classic Telltale hallmarks like story-changing decision making, QTEs that can end in a game over and the classic timer forcing you to think on your feet are all there. But, as writer Andrew Grant, explained, there is a want to distance Dramatic Labs and *Resurgence* from Telltale and its titles. “Our dream at Telltale was always to put more game in our videogame.” He goes on to say, with the team referencing the new capabilities that come with using the Unreal engine,

allowing them to make “seamless choices and blends between gameplay and [the] cinematic”.

“Adding a number of different gameplay styles sort of enhances the kind of like Star Trek roleplay experience. You get to use the tricorder, you get to use the phaser, you get to fly a shuttle, you get to do some sort of like arcadey cover shooting.” Mudle elaborates, and he’s right – there is a lot more action and challenging puzzles in *Resurgence* that makes it unlike any other Telltale-like game. *Resurgence*’s gameplay focuses on more than just making a dialogue choice every few minutes. Some of the puzzles are, at times, infuriatingly difficult – and not just because Steam’s controller mapping was already making my life harder.

Mudle went on to say that, “Sometimes our games were criticised for basically being just movies, you pressed buttons occasionally. And so we’re trying to make it more robust than that this time around.” The interjection of sections with puzzles, dialogue and stealth sequences break up the gameplay nicely, though the Telltale DNA is there in abundance. It’s also worth noting that while

Telltale had a team of over 350 people, *Resurgence* has been created by a team of around 30 dedicated, passionate people telling a story they really care about.

MAKE IT SO

There have been several nice canonical Star Trek references made during my playthrough – having the choice to command “engage!” to the helm, Star Trek science babble only Data would be able to understand and the obvious throwbacks to *The Next Generation* series – but Grant tells me there are a good few more exciting Easter eggs to come. “In this universe, there are characters that you know and love that you will have the opportunity to interact with.”

Ambassador Spock appears early on in the game and by no means overshadows the story but, quite frankly, if Jonathan Frakes reprises his role as Commander William T Riker later in the story then I might just have to do a little scream. While not episodic, *Resurgence* has three distinct acts and each switch between Jara and Carter is treated as a new episode with a unique title. “We’ve often said it’s like three Star Trek movies stitched together,” is how Mudle described it, which sounds about right given my experience during the hands-on.

It would be easy to compare *Resurgence* to previous Telltale games, but it just hits differently. It’s real Star Trek, with all the shenanigans and drama and danger we’ve come to know and expect over the decades. I’m glad I’m not roleplaying as my favourite captain and instead get to experience a unique and exciting new saga that boldly takes Star Trek to a new level: with a damn good videogame. ■

THERE HAVE BEEN SEVERAL NICE CANONICAL STAR TREK REFERENCES MADE DURING MY PLAYTHROUGH

SPACE TIME

The life of a Starfleet officer

25% SOLVING PUZZLES

Want to beam your crewmates aboard? There’s a puzzle.

45% TALKING

Whether that’s making life-saving decisions or choosing to smooch your coworker, you’ll do a lot of chatting.



15% SCANNING THINGS

Your tricorder is a useful tool, so get scanning.

10% FLYING SHUTTLES

Even commanders have to pilot the shuttle sometimes.

5% WALKING AROUND

Gotta stretch those legs in between all that scanning.



TOP: Spacewalking isn't all that easy when danger is everywhere.

LEFT: The USS Resolute: a powerful science vessel.



SUBSCRIBE FOR 2 YEARS

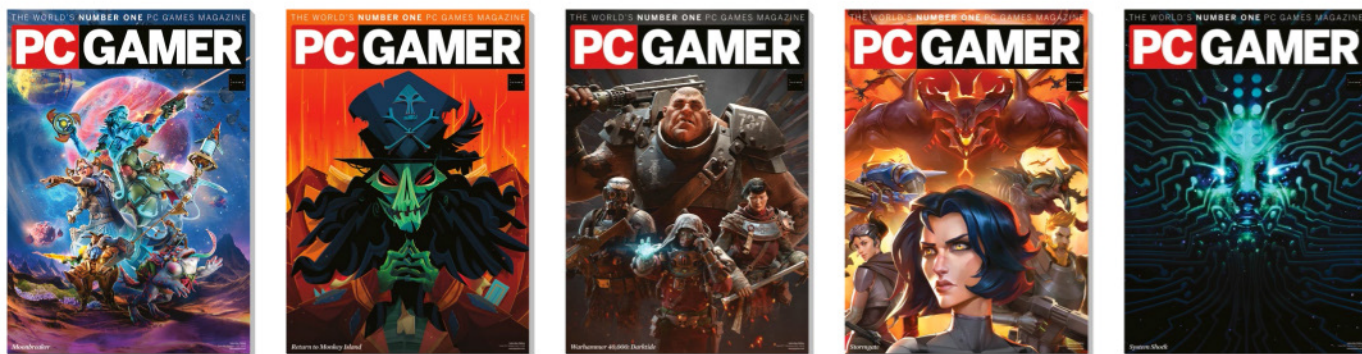
& get an incredible **Austrian Audio**
PG16 Pro Gaming Headset

FREE GIFT

- Soft memory foam earpads to keep you comfortable during the longest sessions
- **Foldable construction for easy storage**
All metal hinges for maximum durability
- **Detachable 1.4 m cable included**
- **Multi-Platform:**
Compatible with PC, Mac®, PS4™, PS5™, Xbox™ (controllers with TRRS socket)

WORTH
£149





Great reasons to subscribe

- Brilliant value – save money on the cover price
- You'll never miss an issue
- Delivered direct to your door

THE 6 MONTH PACKAGE

£36.50

EVERY 6 MONTHS

13 issues of PC Gamer
in print over **12 months**

SAVE 19%

THE ANNUAL PACKAGE

£72.99

ONE TIME PAYMENT

13 issues of PC Gamer
in print over **12 months**

SAVE 19%

THE FREE GIFT PACKAGE

£144.99

ONE TIME PAYMENT

26 issues of PC Gamer
in print over **24 months**,
plus the **Audio PG16**
ProGaming Headset

SAVE 20%

How to subscribe

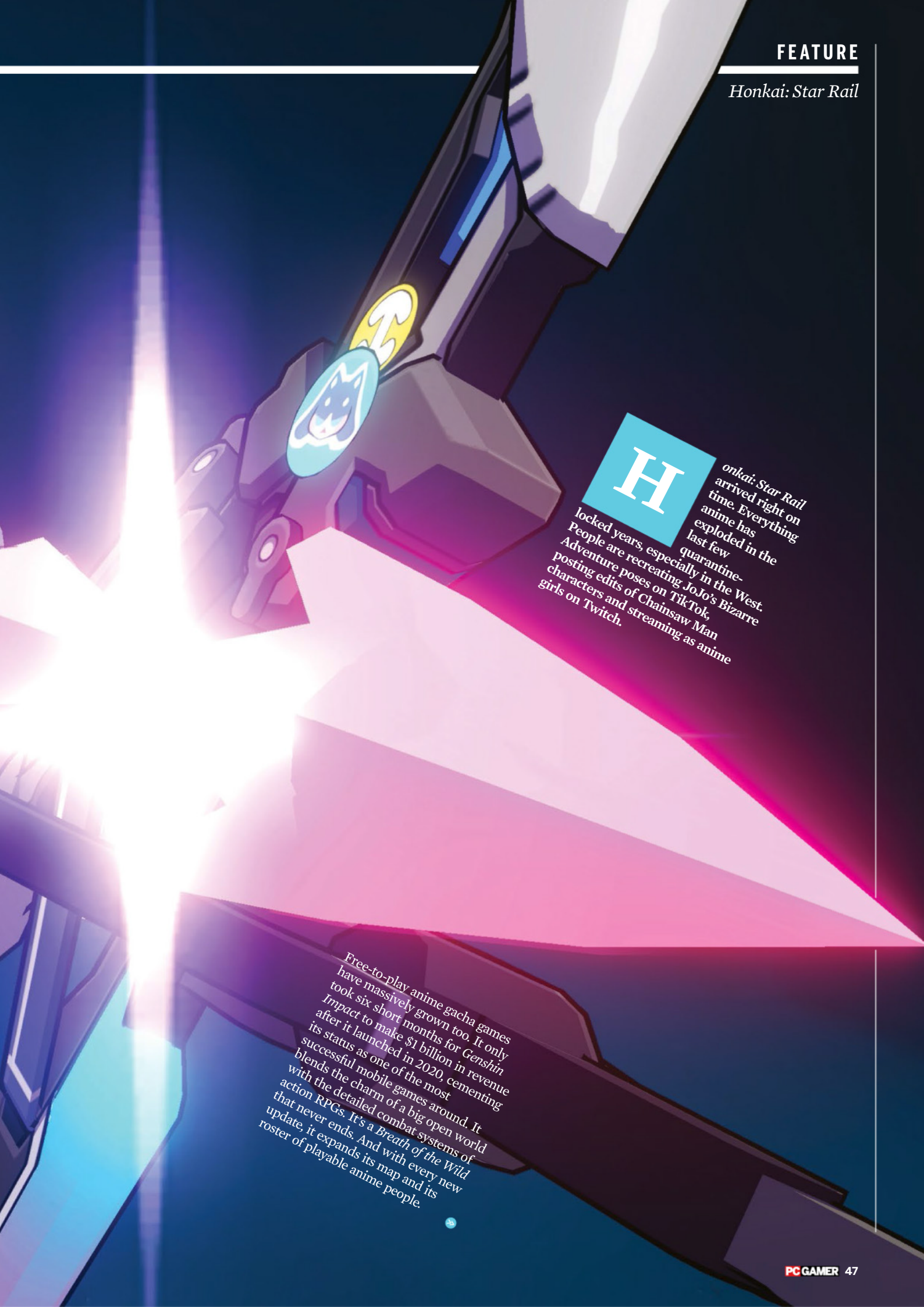
Visit: www.magazinesdirect.com/PCG/B44G

Or call: 0330 333 1113 and quote 'B44G'

TERMS & CONDITIONS: Offer ends 30/4/2023. Offer open to new UK subscribers only. Pricing is guaranteed for the first 12 months and we will notify you in advance of any price changes. Please allow up to six weeks for delivery of your first subscription issue (up to eight weeks overseas). Your gift will be delivered separately within 60 days after your first payment has cleared. Gifts only available to subscribers on the UK mainland. Gift not available with a digital subscription. The full subscription rate is for 12 months (13 issues) and includes postage and packaging. If the magazine ordered changes frequency per annum, we will honour the number of issues paid for, not the term of the subscription. For full terms and conditions, visit www.magazinesdirect.com/terms. For enquiries please call: +44 (0) 330 333 1113. Lines are open Monday - Friday 9am - 5pm UK Time or e-mail: help@magazinesdirect.com. Calls to 0330 numbers will be charged at no more than a national landline call, and may be included in your phone provider's call bundle.

SHINING BRIGHT

HONKAI: STAR RAIL is the new game in the HoYoverse, which looks to be smartly evolving miHoYo's Genshin Impact megahit. *By Tyler Colp*



Honkai: Star Rail arrived right on time. Everything anime has exploded in the last few quarantined years, especially in the West. People are recreating JoJo's Bizarre Adventure poses on TikTok, posting edits of Chainsaw Man characters and streaming as anime girls on Twitch.

Free-to-play anime gacha games have massively grown too. It only took six short months for *Genshin Impact* to make \$1 billion in revenue after it launched in 2020, cementing its status as one of the most successful mobile games around. It blends the charm of a big open world with the detailed combat systems of action RPGs. It's a *Breath of the Wild* that never ends. And with every new update, it expands its map and its roster of playable anime people.

Honkai: Star Rail

☞ To me, and I suspect many others, *Genshin Impact* occupies a similar space in the Western gaming consciousness as *World of Warcraft*. It's a distinct game with a distinct fandom, and almost everyone you talk to has heard of it or plays it. When new characters come out, social media fills up with fan art, cosplays and people commiserating on their gacha luck. Even if you only play games casually, *Genshin Impact* is practically inescapable.

Its continuing success has been amusing to watch, too. If you know what's going on in 2016's *Honkai Impact 3rd*, *Genshin Impact*'s bright world and charming characters look a little bit like a Saturday morning cartoon in comparison. The game drops you into fantastical versions of real-world countries, including China, Japan and France. Its Disney-like approach to each culture is largely respectful and abundantly creative, but some of that sheen can distract you from its lack of black or brown characters, particularly in the South Asian and Middle Eastern-inspired Sumeru zone. Despite considerable criticism over this glaring gap in its world, MiHoYo hasn't addressed the issue.

Maybe because most MiHoYo fans aren't aware of it or maybe because the game's locales aren't as rooted in real world locations, *Honkai Impact 3rd* hasn't dealt with the same level of scrutiny and its possible *Star Rail* won't either. *Honkai* is way more Neon Genesis Evangelion than Disney, but *Star Rail*'s various planets could stir up the conversation once again.

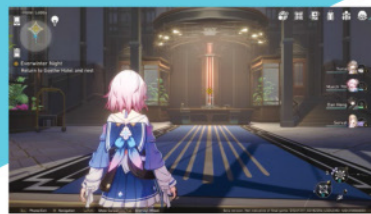
TO THE MOON

With *Star Rail*, MiHoYo is returning to that darker world with a wildly different approach and all of the knowledge it gained from *Genshin Impact*. *Star Rail* takes place a few years after the end of *Honkai Impact 3rd*'s A Post Honkai Odyssey story (a time-jumped expansion to the main story), and follow a group of explorers travelling from planet to planet on a space train.

I played *Star Rail*'s final beta, which covers the opening of the game and two planets' worth of quests. It opens on a space station under attack by robots. After some introductory combat, your main character wakes up and you're fully in control. You can attack and sprint



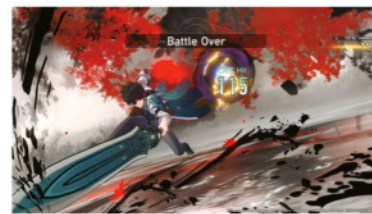
BELOW: Characters can be earned in the story but also rolled for using gacha mechanics.



for as long as you'd like through the sterile hallways of the Herta Space Station. Characters move like they would in *Genshin Impact* right up until you collide with an enemy and the screen begins to crack.

Star Rail is MiHoYo's first turn-based game. You might think a company known for its breakneck action wouldn't ever want to slow things down, but, after spending around 12 hours with *Star Rail*, I can guarantee you it hasn't. Most battles go by quickly once you familiarise yourself with your team and their abilities, and there's an option to run the combat at double speed.

Enemies come in all different shapes and sizes, each with their elemental weaknesses listed below their health bars. While it's possible to ignore these coloured icons on enemies for some battles early on, strong enemies won't take meaningful damage to their health



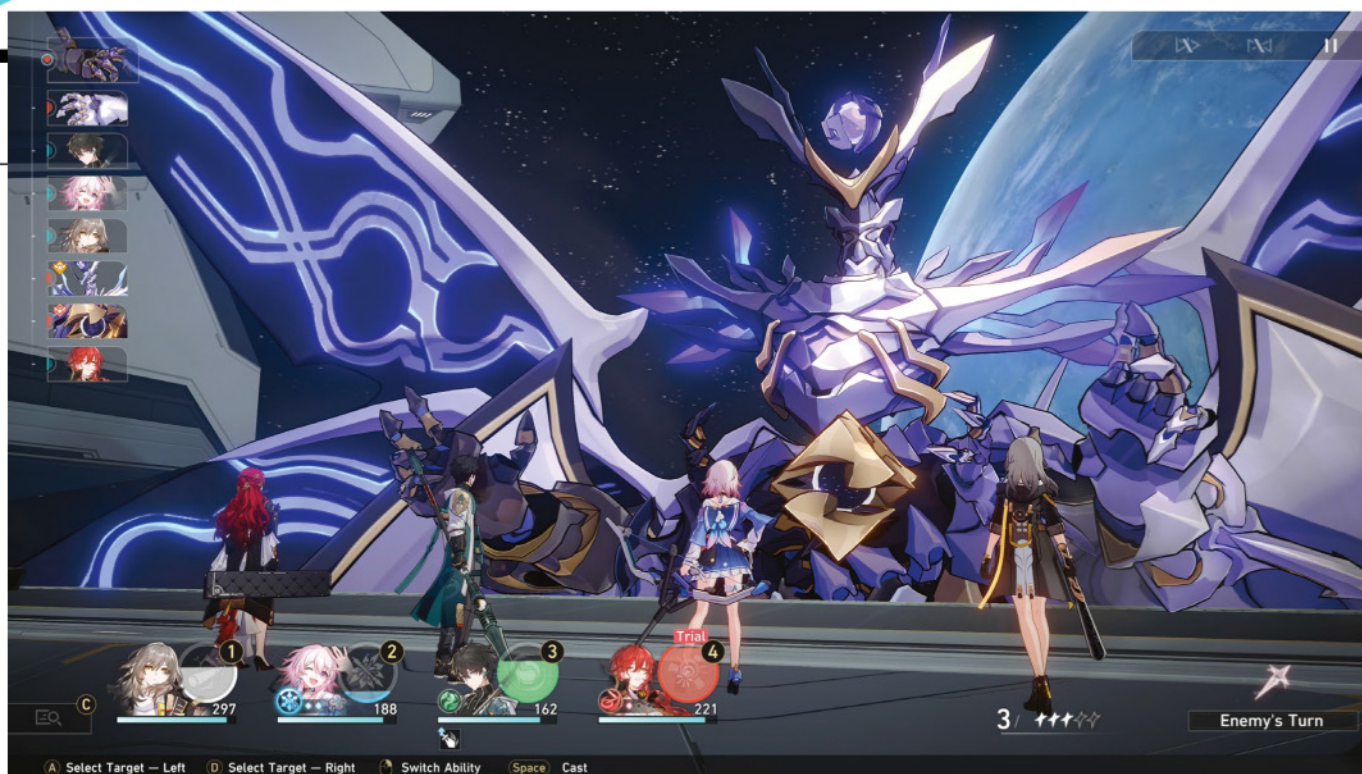
bar until you've worn down their toughness bar using weakness-exploiting matching attacks.

SQUAD UP

Like in *Genshin Impact*, team composition is important. It determines how efficiently you can tear through a group of enemies. You can roll for new characters just like in *Genshin Impact*, but the game starts you off with several to choose from.

The Trailblazer, your silent protagonist who has been gifted with a mysterious godlike power, can smack one or several enemies with a bat, dealing physical damage. She's a hardy gal, but has no way of protecting herself. Enter March 7th (yes, that's her name), a peppy young girl armed with an ice bow and the ability to shield allies from incoming damage. When enemy attacks hit her shield, she counterattacks within the same turn. Stack enough of these





characters with attacks that can trigger off of things like breaking enemies or killing them and you'll be able to spend your turn dealing actual, lethal damage.

In the beta, no fight took longer than five minutes. They're a race to break enemies and keep them broken long enough to delay their attacks and charge up your characters' ultimates. These powerful moves charge as your character deals damage and can be activated at any time. Himeko's ultimate cuts to a scene of her sitting on a chair in a dark void. The camera swoops around her and tilts up just as a laser strike pierces the sky and hits enemies for a ridiculous amount of damage. *Star Rail's* ultimate animations are similar to *Genshin Impact's* but they're way more extravagant. I've seen Serval's ultimate scene probably 100 times, but it's still way too slick to skip.

TERMINALLY ONLINE

Let's rewind. *Star Rail* is a game about a group of explorers with magical powers and a space-faring train. If *Genshin Impact* is a slow-burn story about people, power, and history, *Star Rail* is about a looming cosmic threat and a group of extremely online teens trying to fix it. Although the game borrows the UI from *Genshin Impact*, the metaphor for its menu is a smartphone. When you pause the game, your main character stares down at it and swipes at the screen like they're flipping through TikTok.

You'll frequently receive text messages that set up sidequests and give your character, March 7th and distant anime boy Dan Heng a

chance to chat. These conversations are brief, witty and occasionally hilarious as they repeatedly underline the stupidity of your main character. She asks the group chat about relics, *Star Rail's* version of *Genshin Impact's* artefacts, and is given a detailed explanation by the wisest adult in the game, Welt. One answer later and you're given the ability to blankly respond with, "Thanks. What are Relics?" Welt tells you to ask someone else and the chat ends.

There's a charm to all of *Star Rail's* writing that must come from writers who spent a lot of time on social media. Characters talk about vibes, they post ellipses when someone says something unhinged, and just generally speak like my

ABOVE: Boss battles require you to plan out your attacks to maximise your damage output.

friends and I do. It's refreshing compared to *Genshin Impact's* dry, exposition-filled writing. *Star Rail* dumps all of its detailed lore into books, sidequests and a roguelike mode that features randomised buffs and *Disco Elysium*-like conversations with its mysterious gods. All of it makes for a story that hews closer to a singleplayer JRPG than *Genshin Impact* ever does.

TAKE OFF

It's hard to get a great picture of where the story is going from the beta. Much of it sets up the godlike Aeons and various factions that might be under their influence. The first planet you visit, Jarilo-VI, is encased in ice. You go underground where people mine for its only resource and start to reveal tensions between them and the people topside. Similar to *Genshin Impact*, the main story quests are gated by your trailblaze level, forcing you to spend time with sidequests and repeatable combat challenges to move forward – a tease of what endgame Relic farming will surely look like.

Star Rail might not take over the world like *Genshin Impact*, but its satisfying combat and snappy writing could lure a lot of people over to it. MiHoYo knows exactly who its audience is and why they're here: pretty anime characters, over-the-top action and a slow-burn sci-fi story. Everything else looks like the developers having fun with the amount of room a game of this size and budget can afford you. And for a game you'll be expected to log into every day, spending hundreds, if not thousands of hours in, that's exactly what you want. ■

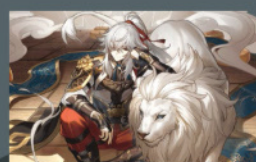
GACHA GROUPIES

The whole reason you're here



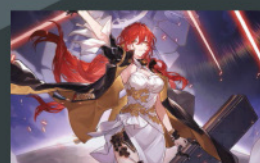
HEAD EMPTY

The Trailblazer isn't the brightest star, but they're persistent.



GENSHIN REJECT

One lion-themed pretty boy, please.



MOMMY? SORRY

Himeko brings class to the Astral Express.



ENCORE

Serval brings a guitar to a sword fight – and wins.

THE HISTORY OF GOD GAMES

A small genre that leaves
an almighty footprint

By Rick Lane

Many videogames furnish the player with godlike powers, but surprisingly few have tried to simulate the complete experience of being a god. A specific sub-genre of management sim that emerged in the late 1980s, god games lend players control not merely over a specific institution or social structure (like a theme park or a city). They give you power over reality itself, letting you shape worlds, create life and destroy both on a whim.

God games are dizzyingly ambitious, and perhaps because of this, only a sparse pantheon has ever been made. Even then, the status of many of these as god games is debatable. Many canonical god games either neglect to acknowledge your role as a god, or outright reject it, expressing the emergence of life through natural processes, rather than divine intervention.

The history of god games doesn't start with a bang or a command. It's more primordial, a confluence of ideas that merged and – dare I say it – evolved over decades. Bits of god games can be seen as far back as 1964's *The Sumerian Game*, and 1968's *Hamurabi*. Both these games cast players as Sumerian kings, tasking them with managing grain harvests in the face of random disasters. Then there's 1983's *Utopia*, a two-player game in which each player runs their own island, *Utopia* is credited as being one of the first games to include city-building and real-time strategy elements.

The holy spirit of god games looms large in the history of PC gaming. So take my disembodied hand, and let us wander through the (intelligently designed) history of this most divine of videogame genres.

Populous 1989

DEVELOPER Bullfrog Productions | PUBLISHER Electronic Arts

The first self-proclaimed god game, *Populous* was the third title released by Bullfrog Productions, formed by Peter Molyneux and Les Edgar in 1987.

Populous explicitly cast the player in the role of a deity capable of wielding divine powers, able to reshape the landscape and conjure terrible disasters.

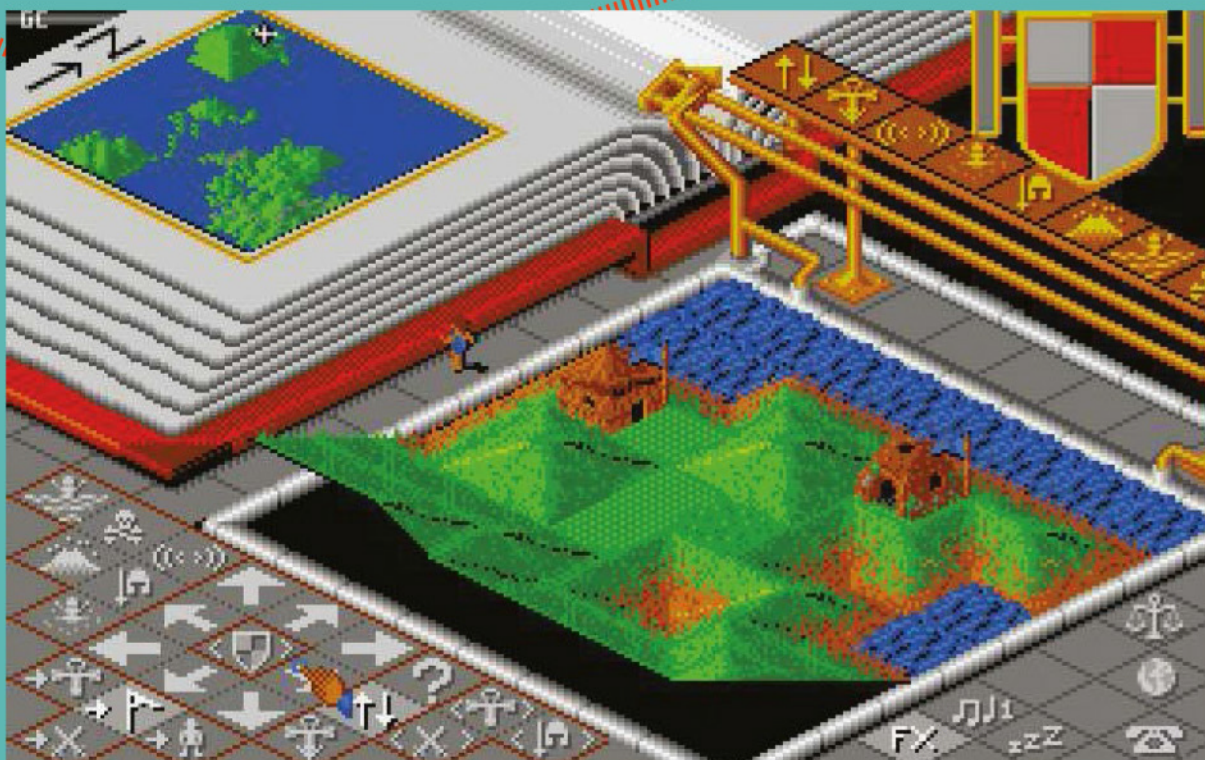
Populous would form the template not just for all future god games, but for Bullfrog's whole approach to game development. The simulationist focus of *Populous* would be equally crucial to later designs like *Theme Park* and *Syndicate*, while the tabletop perspective of *Populous*

speaks particularly to Molyneux's long-cherished goal of deconstructing the barriers between the player and the game world.

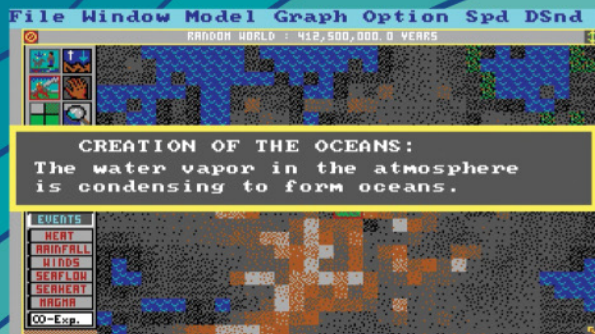
Two years later, Bullfrog released a sequel that massively expanded upon the original premise.

Populous II cast the player as a demigod and spawn of Zeus, and expanded the roster of powers from a measly six to a mighty 30.

While later god games would improve upon the *Populous* template, the games remain the purest expression of the form, and remain impressively playable once you've familiarised yourself with the archaic UI.



The History of God Games



SimEarth 1990

DEVELOPER Maxis | PUBLISHER Maxis

Maxis' follow-up to its smash-hit *SimCity* expanded that game's scope to simulate the evolution of Earth itself, tasking players with evolving sentient life by manipulating phenomena like atmospheric gases and the rate of continental drift.

Strictly speaking, *SimEarth* is not a god game. Unlike *Populous*, it does not refer to the player as a god, and the player's ability to alter the planet is aligned around natural or man-made processes, rather than anything spiritual (this, incidentally, is the fundamental difference between Maxis' life-sims and Bullfrog's). Nonetheless, it does give players direct control over those processes, making them a god for all intents and purposes. It also includes genre's hallmark disasters, like earthquakes, volcanic eruptions and so forth.

It should be noted that Maxis released another god-ish game in 1992 – *SimLife*. At once a more abstract and more detailed version of *SimEarth*, *SimLife* gives players control of the evolutionary process, letting them simulate natural selection and tinker with the genetics of animals to create weird hybrids. Combined, these two games form the ancestral link to 2008's *Spore*.



Afterlife 1996

DEVELOPER LucasArts | PUBLISHER LucasArts

One of the few god games not made by Maxis or Molyneux, *Afterlife* puts players in charge of overseeing both heaven and hell, building the infrastructure of each celestial plain, while ensuring deceased souls end up in the correct afterlife.

Directed by LucasArts alumnus Michael Stemmler, *Afterlife* is a bizarre curio. It's a hugely ambitious concept that has you essentially playing two management sims at once, but both are unobtrusive clones of *SimCity* 2000. This isn't the only area where *Afterlife* exhibits a conflicted personality. While it's themed around heaven and hell, they're not the Christian heaven and hell. Rather, you oversee the afterlife of an alien race, which is definitely a creative decision and not LucasArts

Dungeon Keeper 1997

DEVELOPER Bullfrog Productions | PUBLISHER Electronic Arts

An inverted god game, Bullfrog's delightfully devilish life-sim has players assume the malignant role of The Keeper, charged with trashing an idyllic fantasy realm by building monster-filled dungeons underneath it.

It's an all-timer premise, and although the original *Dungeon Keeper*'s visuals have aged poorly, the underlying game has lost little of its lustre. Carving out training rooms and torture chambers is as satisfying as it ever was, and watching your minions try not to murder each other before they destroy your heroic enemies is almost as much fun as slapping them back into line. The scenario design of *Dungeon Keeper* is sorely underrated too – it's one of the best management games from this era at translating its ideas into compelling, structured play.

Bullfrog would release a sequel – sans Molyneux – in 1999. The debate over which game is superior runs on to this day, but they're certainly within the same orbit of design quality, while *DK2* is easier on the eye thanks to its (supremely detailed for the time) 3D graphics.



chickening out of courting any potential religious controversy.

The need to represent two alien celestial plains results in some truly repulsive visual design. *Afterlife*'s cities resemble a bag of Skittles after being regurgitated by a toddler. That said, it does make one lasting contribution to god gaming: the twin advisors. A goody-two-shoes angel and a cynical demon guide players through the game. This idea would be borrowed by Lionhead Studios for its debut, *Black & White*.

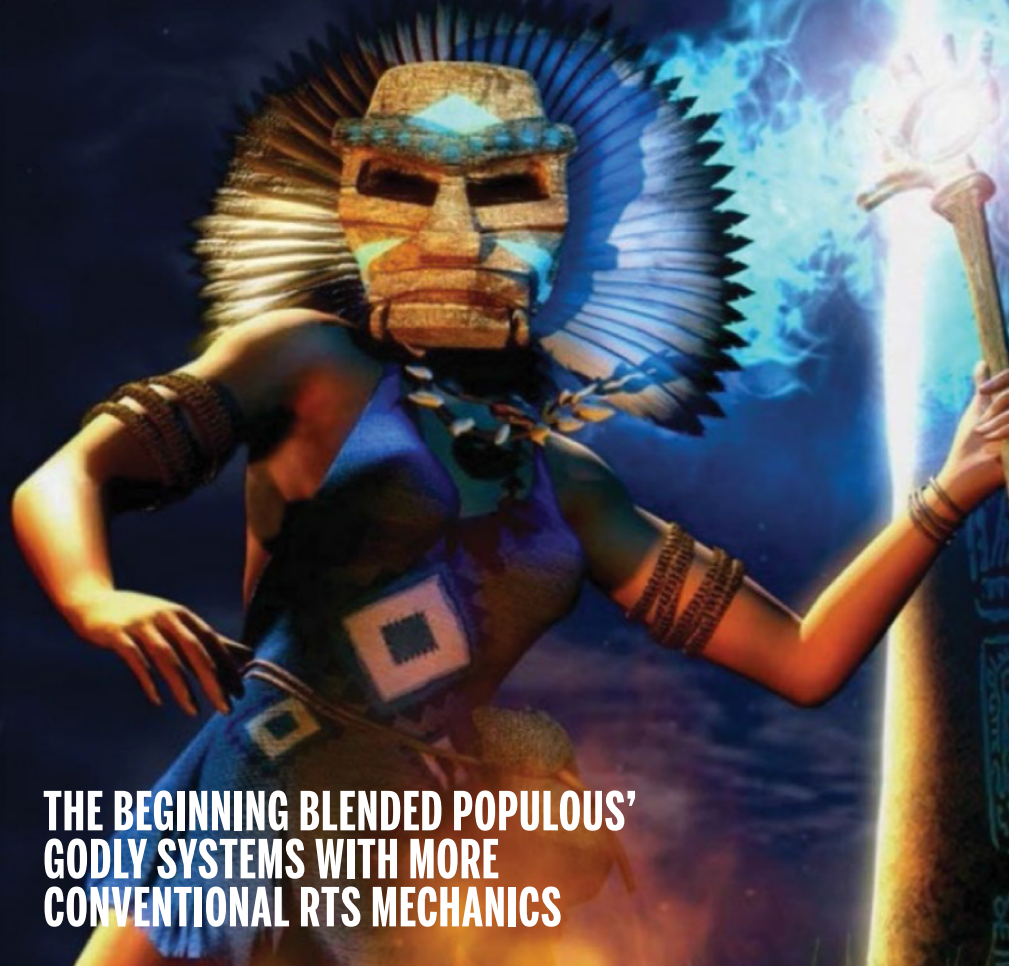
The period between 1997 and 2005 is the golden era of management sims, and just so happens to also be the golden era of god games. It's dominated by Molyneux's two studios Bullfrog and Lionhead, as Maxis largely shifted away from life-sims in favour of sequels to *SimCity*, more specific management sims like *SimSafari*, and, of course, the massive success that was *The Sims*.

Populous: The Beginning 1998

DEVELOPER Bullfrog Productions | PUBLISHER Electronic Arts

Of all the god games featured here, Bullfrog's final *Populous* game is perhaps the one most deserving of a reappraisal. *The Beginning* controversially blended *Populous*' godly systems with more conventional RTS mechanics. Players assumed the role of a shaman with ambitions of deification rather than an actual god, and commanded troops directly alongside casting spells generated through worship.

Dismissed by some as not a true *Populous* game or god game, its critical reception was largely positive, and given how big-budget developers would stop making god games in the following decade, perhaps the story of *The Beginning* is due a different ending.



THE BEGINNING BLENDED *POPULOUS*' GODLY SYSTEMS WITH MORE CONVENTIONAL RTS MECHANICS



Black & White 2000

DEVELOPER Lionhead Studios | PUBLISHER Electronic Arts

The debut title from Peter Molyneux's Lionhead Studios is the quintessential god game. No other title is so dedicated to simulating the experience of being a divine entity, so fundamentally interested in faith, miracles, benevolence and wrath. It lets you recruit followers, build them homes and farms, feed on their worship and convert other tribes. It not only lets you wield the power of a god, but decide what kind of god you want to be. And it manifests your ethereal form into the game world through the Creature, a marvel of videogame AI design that reflects your chosen personality.

Black & White is enormously ambitious, and its experience is often truly divine. But for all its rich systems and technical fortitude, it isn't short on flaws. The biggest problem is that it so rarely lets you enjoy being a god. The game's main campaign has just four islands. The first is a tutorial, the second an extended tutorial, the third inexplicably takes your creature away from you, and the fourth is your final encounter with a rival god named Nemesis. Thankfully the in-built skirmish mode offers greater freedom and, consequently, is probably the most holistic god game experience anywhere within the genre.

Black & White 2 2005

DEVELOPER Lionhead Studios | PUBLISHER Electronic Arts

Although less well regarded than the original, *Black & White 2* gives players much more room to enjoy the experience. It takes the systems of the first game, its simulations of faith and worship, the good/evil dichotomy, the Creature AI, and builds them into more of a game.

Specifically *Black & White 2* adds greater distinction between its two playstyles. 'Good' play revolves around city-building, as you accrue new followers by dazzling them with your civilisation. 'Evil' play turns the game into more of an RTS, as you turn your followers into soldiers and convert other tribes through force and intimidation. It loses some of the original's ineffable magic, but most of what made the first game so captivating is still there, and it channels that power in more effective ways.

Black & White 2 represents the last major god game that could in any way be called great. The next decade would see a handful of attempts to revive the genre, but they'd all end in disappointment or catastrophic failure. From this point onward, the devil would reign supreme.



Spore 2008

DEVELOPER Maxis | PUBLISHER Electronic Arts

Spore was the *No Man's Sky* of its decade, a game hyped up to frenzied levels that simply failed to deliver when it launched. Unlike *No Man's Sky*, however, there was little effort to reverse the game's fortunes.

The premise still sounds as alluring as it ever did. Take a single-celled organism and evolve it all the way up to a galaxy-spanning civilisation. And there are moments of wonder along that epochal journey. Watching your microorganism rapidly grow during the cell stage makes for a fun introduction, and the late reveal of the galaxy stage remains a mind-expanding moment that preceded games like *No Man's Sky* and *Elite Dangerous* by half a decade.

Yet while the scope was mesmerising and the creation tools impressive, the underlying game just wasn't very good. The galaxy stage may have been fascinating, but every other stage was so mechanically dumbed down that, by the time your alien race ascended to the stars, you were sick to the back mandibles of them. As a child-friendly space sim, *Spore* has its merits. As a god game? It's a weak effort.



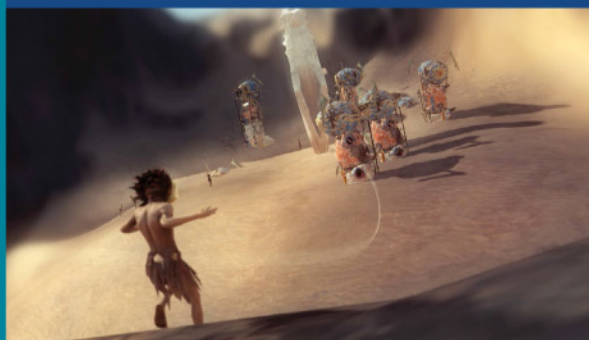
From Dust 2011

DEVELOPER Ubisoft Montpellier | PUBLISHER Ubisoft

Another rare entry from outside the Molyneux/Maxis binary, this time from *Heart of Darkness* developer Eric Chahi. Intended as a spiritual successor to *Populous*, you guide a nomadic tribe through a hostile wilderness, manipulating terrain and natural processes to help them.

From Dust's chief draw is its environment simulation, with players able to adjust the layout of maps by moving natural substances like sand, water, and lava. Yet this is more or less the limit of your powers, and the game struggles to give players room to enjoy them. Most of its levels are stressful exercises in plate-spinning, where one wrong move spells doom for your followers.

From Dust deserves credit for drawing inspiration from outside of Christian/classical faiths. Most god games are heavily Westernised, largely neglecting the vast diversity of belief systems. *From Dust's* nomadic tribespeople are not based on a specific religion or culture, but are refreshingly different to the genre's usual fare.

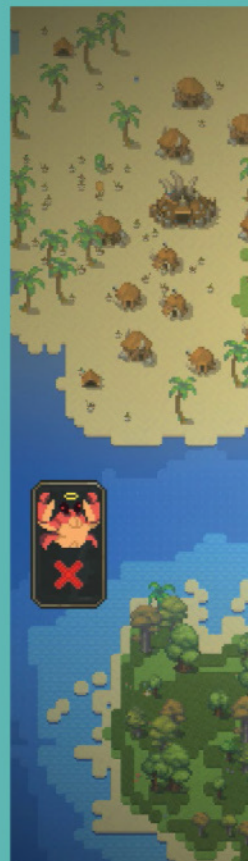


Godus 2013

DEVELOPER 22cans | PUBLISHER DeNA

And so we come to the crucifixion. After creating and nurturing the god game across three decades, Peter Molyneux killed his divine child with this truly terrible excuse for a god game. What began as an undercooked but potentially interesting spin on *Populous* became twisted into an achingly dull management sim corrupted by the worst traits of mobile game design. Rudimentary interactions, agonisingly slow progression, and general lack of anything fun. The game has been out for ten years, and it's still in Steam Early Access. It ought to be banished.

Godus was the last high-profile god game. Peter Molyneux's influence upon god gaming, both in terms of design and its cultural penetration, was enormous. Indeed, it's hard to think of another gaming genre that relies so heavily on one person's passion for it. But that isn't to say god gaming is dead. Over the last decade, a number of indie developers have taken a stab at deification, and while none of these projects are as elaborate and inspired as *Black & White*, a few of them do exhibit divine inspiration.



War for the Overworld 2015

DEVELOPER Brightrock Games | PUBLISHER Brightrock Games

The closest anyone has come to recapturing the magic of *Dungeon Keeper*. Assuming the role of a demonic 'underlord', you carve out dungeons from subterranean rock, lay traps, recruit armies of minions and lay waste to those puny weaklings who call themselves 'Heroes'.

War for the Overworld was moderately well received on launch. And developer Brightrock Games continued to support it for several years after its release in 2015, creating multiple expansions and remastering the base game in 2018. The result is comfortably the best take on *Dungeon Keeper* since the Bullfrog days.



The Universim 2018

DEVELOPER Crytivo Games | PUBLISHER Crytivo Games

Probably the most comprehensive attempt by an indie studio to create a god game. *The Universim* is a seriously ambitious blend of *Spore* and *Black & White*, wherein you guide an emergent humanoid civilisation known from living as a preindustrial tribe into an advanced technological civilisation. But the game doesn't stop there. You'll then guide them beyond their home planet as they explore and colonise new worlds across the stars.

At least, that's the idea. *The Universim* is a Steam Early Access title, and has been that way for almost five years, raising the question of when it will be finished. Yet given this is an indie title, *The Universim* already has an impressive amount to it, and makes the woeful state of *Godus* look downright embarrassing.

YOU CAN NURTURE FACTIONS
OR DESTROY THEM ALL WITH A
GIANT, LASER-SPITTING CRAB



Worldbox: God Simulator 2021

DEVELOPER Maxim Karpenko | PUBLISHER Maxim Karpenko

The most instantly gratifying indie god game, *Worldbox* straddles the line between game and sandbox toy. From the outset, the game graces you with the power to create and destroy its procedurally generated 2D maps, along with any civilisations that might have appeared there. You can nurture individual factions into thriving communities, watch them fight each other in dynamic wars, or destroy them all by spawning a giant, laser-spitting crab. It's hardly the most involved god game going, but it makes up for that with its playful immediacy.

REVIEW

HOW WE REVIEW

We review each game on its own merits, and try to match it to a reviewer who's a passionate expert in the field. The main aim of reviews is to help you make buying decisions. To this end, we're selective about what we review, and try to focus on the notable, interesting, exciting or surprising.

DOWNLOADABLE CONTENT

DLC might be new missions for a game, or it might be a single new item. If we think you want to know about it, we'll review it.

EARLY ACCESS

Any released alpha, beta, or otherwise unfinished game that you can currently pay for. For these games, we won't assign a score, but we will tell you whether they're worth your time.

THEY'RE BACK

Whenever there's a bargain or re-release of a significant game, our expert will revisit it and tell you whether it holds up today. With jokes.

OUR SCORING SYSTEM EXPLAINED

00%-09% Broken or offensively bad; absolutely no value.

Example *Leisure Suit Larry: Magna Cum Laude*

10%-19% We might be able to find one nice thing to say about it, but still not worth anyone's time or money.

Example *Gettysburg: Armored Warfare*

20%-29% Completely falls short of its goals. Very few redeeming qualities.

Examples *Family Guy: Back to the Multiverse*

30%-39% An entirely clumsy or derivative effort. There's little reason to play this game over a similar, better one.

Examples *Trials of the Blood Dragon*

40%-49% Flawed and disappointing.

Examples *Aliens: Colonial Marines*

50%-59% Mediocre. Other games probably do it better, or its unique qualities aren't executed well.

Examples *Primordia, Homefront: The Revolution*

60%-69% There's something to like here, but it can only be recommended with major caveats.

Examples *No Man's Sky, Ghost Recon: Wildlands*

70%-79% A good game that's worth playing. We like it.

Examples *Prey, NieR: Automata*

80%-89% A great game with exceptional moments or features, and touches of brilliance. We love it.

Examples *Overwatch, Night in the Woods*

90%-94% A compelling recommendation for most PC gamers. Important to PC gaming, and likely ahead of its time.

Examples *Bayonetta, Dishonored 2*

95%-96% Far and away one of the best games we've ever played. We recommend it to the entire world.

Examples *Half-Life 2, Kerbal Space Program*

97%-100% Advances the human species. Boosts the immune systems of nearby children and small animals.



The Editor's Choice award is granted in addition to the score, at the discretion of the PC Gamer staff. It represents exceptional quality or innovation.

Find out more
www.bit.ly/pcgreviews



Mixed signals

This month the PC Gamer reviews machine tackles two games that ask gamers to make plenty of choices, but the first of them, unfortunately, is whether or not they should even pick them up, regardless of their clear quality.

Hogwarts Legacy and *Atomic Heart* are, as you can discover in this issue, both good if not truly great games, and from a detached perspective they are well worth playing. Both are games that have clearly been made with great doses of love and respect for the fictional worlds and genres they are influenced by, and the developers deserve a hat tip for delivering on two truly ambitious and fun to play gaming experiences.

However, with the contentious issues surrounding both, only each gamer can individually ask themselves if they're happy to enjoy them, and that's such a shame.

R. Jones

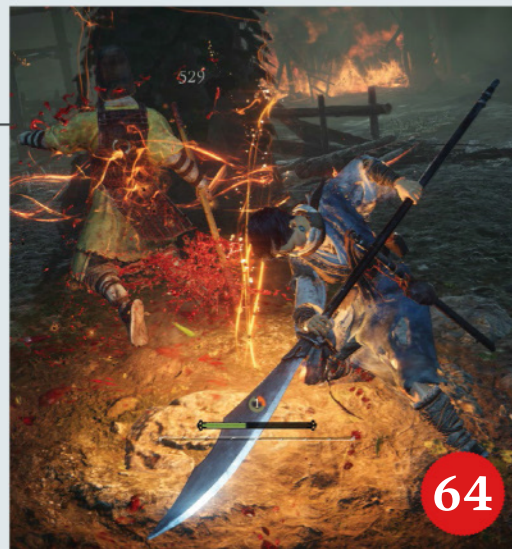
ROBERT JONES

PRINT EDITOR

robert.jones@futurenet.com

**LET US KNOW
WHAT YOU THINK**

Email us via letters@pcgamer.com with your reactions, or simply tweet us your thoughts @PCGamer



Contents

- 58** Hogwarts Legacy
- 64** **WoLong: Fallen Dynasty**
- 68** Labyrinth of Galleria: The Moon Society
- 70** **Atomic Heart**
- 74** Returnal
- 76** **Company of Heroes 3**
- 80** Wanted: Dead

82 Like a Dragon: Ishin!

FREE GAMES

- 88** Babbdi
- 89** **Feet in the Snow**
- 89** Stereogram

THEY'RE BACK

- 90** Sea of Thieves
- 91** **Divinity: Original Sin 2**
- 91** Fran Bow

This month's magical reviewers...



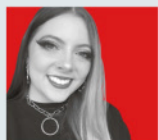
MORGAN PARK
Specialist in
Broomstick livery
Currently playing
Hogwarts Legacy
This month
Spent too long
decorating the Room
of Requirement.



RICH STANTON
Specialist in
Wearing ushankas
Currently playing
Atomic Heart
This month
Got grossed out by a
disturbing Soviet
vending machine.



**DOMINIC
TARASON**
Specialist in
Soba slurping
Currently playing
Like a Dragon: Ishin!
This month
Was a macho man in
19th century Japan.



MOLLIE TAYLOR
Specialist in
B-game schlock
Currently playing
Wanted: Dead
This month
Enjoyed sickeningly
cruel and unusual
dismemberment.



MATT ELLIOTT
Specialist in
Shivering timbers
Currently playing
Sea of Thieves
This month
Casted and directed
Carry On Corsair: The
Musical.





WANDS UP

HOGWARTS LEGACY is the best Potter game yet, but a hard one to get excited about

By Morgan Park

I was over 20 hours into *Hogwarts Legacy* before it revealed that, on top of being an expansive RPG with skill trees, wizard combat, crafting, environmental puzzles and loads of sidequests, it's also a quaint home decorating game with a splash of zoo management. This is a much larger game than I think anyone was anticipating and as I've completed the main quest and dozens of sidequests over 50 hours, I'm still surprised by how good each individual element is.

It suffers from a meandering start and distracting technical issues, but once I was set free to explore the entirety of Hogwarts and miles of countryside surrounding it, I enjoyed *Hogwarts Legacy* in the same ways I did *The Witcher 3* or *Red Dead Redemption 2*: moseying across a convincingly rendered world at my own pace, letting myself disappear into a character I'm invested in.

Like those open world classics I just mentioned, *Hogwarts Legacy* is a game you've probably played before, but also a rarity: a big-budget RPG attempting to bottle up all of the prestige, splendour and expectations of a massive media property into a seamless sandbox. For the most part, it nails it. This is Harry Potter's *Arkham Asylum* moment – a game telling its own story in an established world, unshackled by the restrictive deadlines and creative boundaries of

a movie tie-in, created by a studio that was itself once relegated to obligatory marketing products like *Toy Story 3: The Video Game*.

Hogwarts Legacy had a firm grasp

on my brain throughout my playthrough. I'd catch myself thinking about zapping dark wizards with blasts of Confringo when I should be preparing dinner or pondering what scarf goes best

with my new favourite coat, which plant I should grow to brew invisibility potions quicker, and whether or not the game will ever stop hitching when I move between Hogwarts' many towers (it won't). I'm also, unfortunately, thinking about JK Rowling.

WIZARD BOWL

Usually it's an uncomplicated thing when games are good. We like them, they surprise us, I write about it, it's

This is Harry Potter's Arkham Asylum moment

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
An open world RPG in the Harry Potter universe

EXPECT TO PAY
£55

DEVELOPER
Avalanche Software

PUBLISHER
Warner Bros Interactive

REVIEWED ON
Ryzen 7 5700G,
16GB RAM, GeForce
RTX 3060

MULTIPLAYER
No
LINK
hogwartslegacy.com

fun. But the fun of *Hogwarts Legacy* forms a unique set of conflicted feelings: I'm enjoying a game that's an extension of JK Rowling, a powerful person who's used their platform to make transphobic comments in the last several years, applying her wealth and fame to promote an ideology that rejects and further marginalises one of society's most vulnerable communities.

Hogwarts Legacy isn't written by JK Rowling or directly adapted from her stories. In fact, Warner Bros and Portkey Games (the game publishing arm of Harry Potter properties) go as far as to say that she was "not involved in the creation of the game" at all. Still, it's built upon the world that she created and inherits some of its problems, particularly its portrayal of goblins and house elves. Its success is likely to benefit her both culturally and financially.

It will also benefit the talented folks at Avalanche Software, who have built a rich, almost annoyingly detailed world that routinely exceeds its source material in terms of quality and inclusivity. *Hogwarts Legacy* is full of simple but harmonious systems that keep things fun.

Wizard duels are a unique take on ranged combat where no aiming is required but spacing, dodging, and countering is key. Think Batman with

HOGWARTS HISTORY

Reviewing old Harry Potter games based on 20-year-old memories



HARRY POTTER AND THE PHILOSOPHER'S STONE 2001

I'm almost certain I played this on the PS1. All I know is it stoked a passionate fandom for Harry Potter when I was little. **70%**



HARRY POTTER AND THE CHAMBER OF SECRETS 2002

One of my favourite PS2 games, but I got scared by the snakes. I could be heard yelling "flipendo!" for months. **64%**



HARRY POTTER: QUIDDITCH WORLD CUP 2003

A pretty decent simulation of quidditch if memory serves. I liked it so much that I begged to have it on both PS2 and GBA. **90%**



HARRY POTTER AND THE PRISONER OF AZKABAN 2004

You could fly a Hippogriff around the Hogwarts grounds! That might've been my first true sandbox experience. **80%**



HARRY POTTER AND THE GOBLET OF FIRE 2005

I only played the Nintendo DS version of this one and I hated it so much that I was soured on Potter games for years. **37%**



HARRY POTTER AND THE HALF-BLOOD PRINCE 2009

This surprised the hell out of me for being decent, especially the gesture-based spell combat that was a little like *Skate*. **75%**

cooldowns (and more murder). Your clothes, cloaks, scarves, facewears and hats have *Destiny*-like offensive/defensive stats, but you can just set your cosmetic look to whatever you want. You also do a whole lot of talking, often with two or three dialogue choices that express a chosen personality within bounds (but only rarely seem to influence the outcome of interactions). I was especially surprised by the Room of Requirement: a personalised living space for your wizard with an almost *Animal Crossing*-level of decoration options. Eventually, it gets a lot bigger.

The single most impressive aspect of *Hogwarts Legacy* is Hogwarts itself. Developers love to describe their games as “living, breathing worlds” but it’s difficult to think of any better way to characterise the titular castle.

You can’t walk ten feet without a part of Hogwarts castle coming alive: books reorganise themselves on shelves, suits of armour salute passers-by, hedges trim themselves to perfection, ghosts float around telling jokes, textbooks flutter above passing students, and paintings animate or converse as if the MOMA switched to the .gif standard. My favourite hallway of Hogwarts is an unassuming corridor near a courtyard where two golden suits of armour slyly antagonise each other with a kick each time I pass by. One time the right-hand suit, after it’d presumably had it up to here with lefty’s shenanigans, took up its mace and beat the ever-loving crap out of the other guy.

That grandeur isn’t always a blessing, though. Avalanche’s dogmatic pursuit of a realistic Hogwarts has made the place an honest-to-god maze. Central Hall alone spokes off in six or seven directions, each spiralling up toward classrooms or down into dungeons. I’ve never climbed more videogame stairs in my life – I’m winded just thinking about it. I usually like to disable navigational markers in open-world games and learn the map myself, but since I don’t have three years to spare, I constantly hit the button that conjures a golden trail to my destination.

You can’t walk ten feet without a part of Hogwarts coming alive

The beginning hours of *Hogwarts Legacy* immersed me pleasantly in the life of a student: attending classes, making fast friends and getting up to some harmless teen mischief like sneaking into the library after hours. I loved that learning new spells was organically weaved into these personable cutscenes and looked

forward to every return trip to Potions or Defence of the Dark Arts. It’s in these moments that I felt the most at home at Hogwarts, but as I progressed, the game became increasingly disinterested with school life. I sorely missed seeing “go to class” appear on my quest log after I’d mastered all of the basic spells.

COMING OF AGE

It’s around halfway through the school year that the gaps in *Hogwarts’* fantasy become more noticeable. For as reactive the world can be to your presence, it’s not especially interactive – you can grab an apple from a bowl or sip tea in the common room, but you can’t sit in chairs, have dinner in the Great Hall,

or make small talk with students. Eventually I felt more like a visitor in a museum of puzzles, which is fun to pick apart in its own way but less gratifying than, for instance, chopping wood or swapping stories in *Red Dead Redemption 2*’s camp.

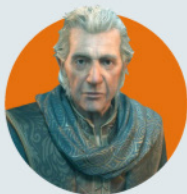
As the stakes of *Hogwarts Legacy*’s story get higher, it becomes less interested in cosy, comforting school life. Developing in the background of my wizard’s first days of class is a mysterious ancient magic that apparently only I can wield and a goblin rebellion that eventually becomes impossible to ignore. More quests started dragging me out into the highlands, where everything wants to kill me, even when I really just wanted to hang with my buds. By the latter half of the story, student hijinks are replaced by grim wizarding warfare – the same bestie who snuck into the library with me in the first act of the story is eventually raiding mines and slaying goblins, spiders and poachers with me by the dozens.

If the plot of *Hogwarts Legacy* is starting to sound like its source material, that’s because it’s basically Harry Potter set to 1.75x speed. The parallels go beyond coincidental and well into distracting: a protagonist who quickly proves to be a uniquely gifted wizard, gets loads of special attention and perks from professors who supposedly have hundreds of other students (does every student get to craft a home base inside the Room of Requirement, or is it just me?), and wields a unique power that constantly lands them in real danger from villains. It didn’t help that I insisted on joining Harry Potter’s house, Gryffindor, despite placing into Hufflepuff.

I really wish Avalanche had gone in a more original direction here, if not to distinguish itself from Harry Potter, then because I’m tired of playing The Most Important Person in videogames. Low-stakes stories are underrated and, like *The Witcher 3*, some of my favourite moments in *Hogwarts Legacy* came from the strangers I met accepting random sidequests in the highlands – heisting plants for a spurned business partner seeking revenge, looking into a weird statue for an old lady, or playing detective for a vendor who thinks his sister is robbing him blind. I must’ve checked off a few dozen sidequests in my playthrough and kept finding

GUIDING HANDS

Your two closest confidants at Hogwarts



ELEAZAR FIG

HOGWARTS PROFESSOR

Professor Fig teaches magical theory at Hogwarts, when he’s not investigating goblin conspiracies.

SKILLED WIZARD

His colleagues at Hogwarts highly regard Professor Fig’s abilities as both teacher and wizard.

TRUSTED FRIEND

Fig quickly proves to be a trusted confidant of the your *Hogwarts Legacy* protagonist, teaching you the basics of wizardry.

A TAD SPACEY

Following the mysterious death of his wife Miriam, Professor Fig hasn’t been at his best at Hogwarts, often leaving to follow leads.



MATILDA WEASLEY

DEPUTY HEADMISTRESS

Professor Weasley is second in command at Hogwarts, though it’s clear early on that she’s the real captain of the ship.

TRANSFIGURATION PROFESSOR

Professor Weasley also finds time to teach transfiguration class, where players learn useful spells.

COUNSELLOR

Though your relationship with Professor Weasley isn’t always one of trust, she proves to be a thoughtful counsellor.

A WEASLEY

Matilda Weasley is, we must assume, an ancestor of Harry Potter’s best friend Ron Weasley (though she is noticeably more impressive).



ABOVE: MVP of *Hogwarts Legacy* goes to Deek, the very nice house elf that tends the Room of Requirement.

BELOW: Hogsmeade, the "only all wizarding village in Britain" is where you do all your shopping.





Players are offered a house based on a simple Q&A, but you can ultimately choose which one you join.



FAR RIGHT: Flying your broom (just about) anywhere you want is a major highlight of *Hogwarts Legacy*.

BELOW: Your investigation of ancient magic begins before ever stepping foot in Hogwarts.



more as I wrapped the main story. Warner Bros says there are over 100 sidequests out there and I believe it.

KILLING CURSE

When Harry and Voldemort square off in their final battle at the end of *The Deathly Hollows*, magical combat looks sort of boring.

They're glaring and grimacing as they point sticks at one another without moving their feet, sort of like a very boring episode of *Dragon Ball Z*. But thankfully, *Hogwarts Legacy* manages to make magic cool.

That's partially because, instead of returning to the stilted stationary wand combat of the old *Harry Potter* games, *Hogwarts Legacy* takes a cue from its fellow Warner-published *Batman* games.

Your shockingly capable teenager often takes on six or seven baddies simultaneously, ducking and dodging out of the way of danger and juggling enemies with levitation spells. Attacks will automatically hit who you're targeting, but the challenge comes in choosing the right spells to exploit enemy weaknesses, manage cooldowns, block or dodge attacks, and keep your distance from beefed-up goblins with axes.

A lot of the fun is owed to top-shelf animation work – the way my wizard chains spells together with expressive flicks of the wand, twirls or leans into an attack to give it some extra oomph, or deflects a magic missile without looking makes every fight miles more dramatic and fun to watch than the films.

Hogwarts is a very easy game (so much that I recommend everyone give the hardest difficulty a try), but I never got bored of swapping between my dozen-plus spells to slice, burn, freeze, explode, or curse jerks into the ground. That said, it never stops feeling a little weird to go on murdering sprees outside school grounds one minute and then show up to broom class the next.

What did get boring were all the repeat boss battles. There's a cool troll boss fight near the beginning of the game that really flexes your dodging skills. I've fought clones of that exact troll at least eight or nine more times since then in both optional and mandatory quest

moments and eventually got so sick of them that I'd do everything in my power to stealth around them. In fact, all enemies bigger than my wizard can go in the bin simply because they're too large to hit with the single most enjoyable spell combo in the game – a front flip into the air with *Flipendo*, followed by a barrage of

magic bolts while they helplessly float, ending with a piledrive into the dirt with *Descendo*.

A lot of the fun is owed to top-shelf animation work

SHAKY GROUND

Hogwarts Legacy often buckles under the weight of its meticulous world.

Persistent technical issues wore on me throughout my playthrough. Most noticeable is consistent stuttering when entering new areas of Hogwarts castle or the storefronts of Hogsmeade. As Early Access players have also reported, the PC version chugs as if your system can't handle the game when it's not actually pushing your hardware very much at all (in the some of the worst dips I experienced, not even 60% of my RTX 3060 was being utilised). CPU doesn't seem to be the bottleneck either, leaving many to believe it's a shader compilation issue, a somewhat common problem in massive Unreal Engine 4 games.

Honestly, it sounds worse on paper than it feels in action. The stuttering didn't get on my nerves because it'd mostly happen while on the way to places, not during combat or conversation. My framerate

bounced all over the place depending on location, too, with the lowest point of my tests around 45fps in the dense streets of Hogsmeade. That said, my average framerate was decent enough (average of ~60fps on medium and with DLSS on Quality mode) that I wouldn't have noticed any problems had I not turned on a performance overlay. I played most of the game without checking my framerate, and I can't recommend it enough.

The only truly annoying hiccups are the brief, yet frequent pauses at the doors of Hogwarts while the game is loading whatever's on the other side. These loads are different from stutters – a spinning loading symbol actually appears on the door while you wait. Thankfully I've never had to wait more than more than two seconds for a door to open on my setup, but it's a blemish on an otherwise immersive world.

As of launch day, *Hogwarts Legacy* also has a significant pop-in problem. Arrive at a location by broom slightly faster than the game anticipated and students will fade into existence. Coasting high above the countryside can also confuse the engine as it spawns and despawns entities below you. Render distances and streaming budgets are technical hurdles that most open-world games control by keeping players grounded and curating lines of sight, but *Hogwarts* doesn't have that luxury.

Hogwarts also doesn't have the luxury of just being a videogame. It's so rare that we get a licensed, blockbuster game like this – one that mostly delivers on the enormous scale of an intricate fantasy world that's had decades to develop in our minds and on film. But Avalanche Software's achievement is dented by its association with a creator who has wielded their power and fortune to undercut the legal and social acceptance of trans people.

What could've been a moment of celebration for a series that's overdue for a great videogame is complicated by the fact that its success is a win for JK Rowling, and all the bad feelings associated with the desire to play the cool new wizard RPG. ■

DECK COMPATIBLE

Should you play it on a Steam deck?



PROS

1. Runs at a respectable 35-45fps in graphically intense locations.
2. The kind of RPG that's perfect for playing on the couch.
3. Looks pretty good even at medium settings.

CONS

1. Framerate will jump around if you don't set a conservative cap.
2. A smaller screen means losing some of the majesty of Hogwarts.
3. Likely to drain your battery very fast.

PC GAMER VERDICT

Hogwarts Legacy is a great game with plenty of sidequests and puzzles, but is haunted by a terrible creator.

83

QI TO THE KINGDOMS

WO LONG redefines the action RPG with spectacle and depth

By Samantha Greer

Wo Long, meaning 'Hidden Dragon', is an appropriate name for a game that feels like it's basically come from nowhere to tear up the action RPG landscape. Which isn't to say it doesn't adhere to some of that framework – the legacy of *Nioh* and *Dark Souls* is still present – but by removing the traditional constraints of the sub-genre, *Wo Long* takes soaring flight.

It's a project born from Team Ninja's partnership with Koei, a developer and publisher well known for its games based around the Three Kingdoms era of Chinese history – most notably *Dynasty Warriors*. *Wo Long* is set in that same era, blending historical fiction with the finely honed combat Team Ninja is known for, along with a dash of the fantastical and demonic. You are an unnamed warrior; a nobody who gets tangled up in monumental events. As if to drive home your nobody status, the very first boss might be the toughest in the entire game. You encounter this giant of a man before you have any major skills, spells or special weapons to call upon. He's only the first boss but still he has two tough-as-nails phases. Beating him is the price of

admission, a test to prove that you're ready to stand beside the heroes of Chinese legend. "You must be this good to enter," *Wo Long* seems to say.

Being a nobody doesn't mean feeling like one. Right from the get-go fights are a dizzying dance of spins, leaps and kicks that echoes the Wuxia cinematic tradition the game draws upon. *Wo Long*'s combat is a big change of pace from other *Souls*-likes and

even Team Ninja's own *Nioh 2*. Where they emphasise searching for openings to land deadly strikes and making sure your own defences don't falter, *Wo Long* has a flow to it that is less back and forth and more constantly in motion.

DIE NASTY, WARRIORS

This is down to the lack of a *Souls*-like staple, stamina, which has

Even the toughest of bosses can die as easily as you can

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Action RPG

EXPECT TO PAY
£55

DEVELOPER
Team Ninja

PUBLISHER
Koei Tecmo

REVIEWED ON
Intel i7-4790K,
16GB RAM, Nvidia
GeForce GTX 970

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
teamninja-studio.com/wolong

been replaced by your spirit gauge. You're free to attack, block and dodge as much as you want when the gauge is positive, but you've got to time your moves right. Playing too defensively, spamming your most powerful attacks or getting blocked by your opponent reduces your spirit, which will leave you stunned when it's fully negative. Landing hits and pulling off successful deflects or parries, meanwhile, lets you regain spirit. The beauty of this is that, when you know what you're doing, nothing can hold you back. By creating openings with a gentle parry, dodging around attacks, and then laying into an enemy, you can get through fights without ever losing momentum.

Even the toughest of bosses can die as easily as you can, provided you can keep pace with them. You can spend an hour learning and dying to a boss only for your successful attempt to last 60 seconds. Because it's all go, all the time, the moment a fight clicks with you it feels like perfecting a choreographed scene. Because the game telegraphs attacks so clearly despite the ferocious speed of battles, I was able to follow the action and land my parries in a way that genre peers like *Sekiro* really had me struggling to do.

As if that wasn't enough of an arsenal, you have spells and the ability to summon spirits to aid you. Spells are all tied to each of the game's five stats (each representing one of the five phases of Wuxing philosophy) and embody related elements (fire, water etc) but you're not a wizard. Spells aren't something you build around, you use them to compliment your moves by adding lightning to a blade or planting a circle that slows enemies. The spirit summons are a special ability you can call upon after filling a meter that lets you bring in a powerful entity to back you up with serious buffs. These summons are an ace up your sleeve to claw back a victory from the jaws of defeat. Stuff like this meant I never

HISTORICAL GO FIGURES

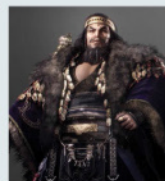
Some of the Three Kingdoms' major players



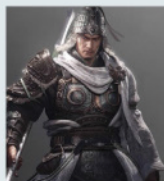
CAO CAO
Cao Cao was one of the most powerful men during the Three Kingdoms era who joins you against the Yellow Turbans.



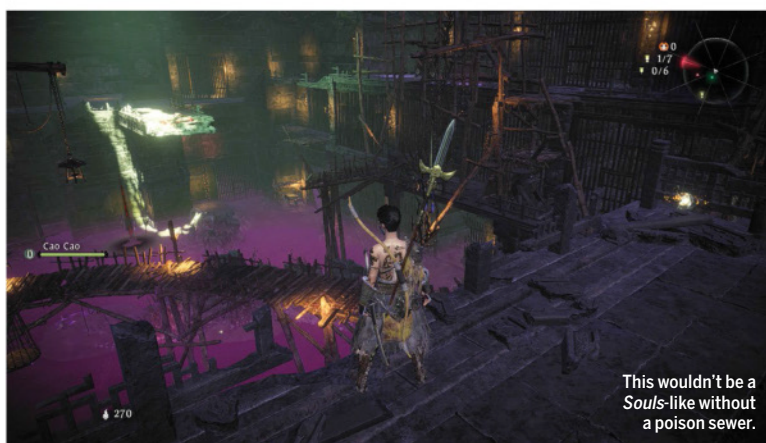
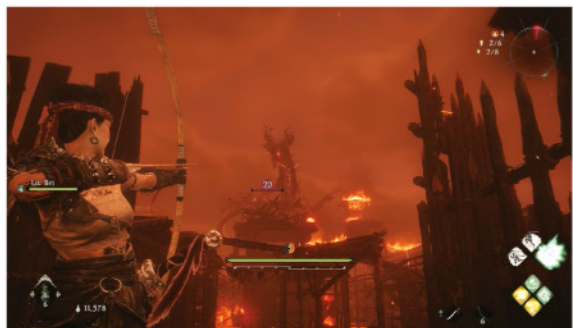
LIU BEI
Born in poverty but becoming a great leader who fought the Yellow Turbans, Liu Bei would go on to fight warlords.



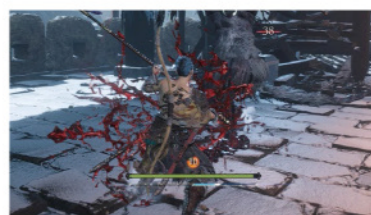
DONG ZHOU
The villain in Three Kingdoms tales and all the more fearsome thanks to the warrior Lu Bu who fights for him.



ZHAO YUN
Little is known about the real Zhao Yun but *Wo Long*'s version is basically your best bud, who never hesitates to help.



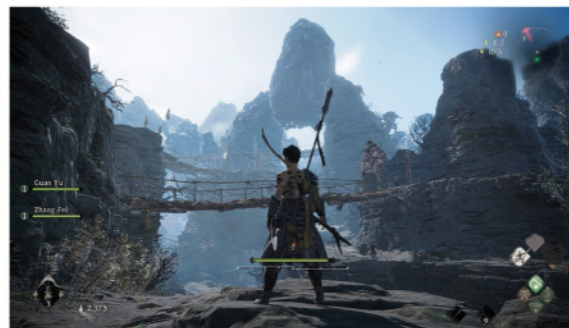
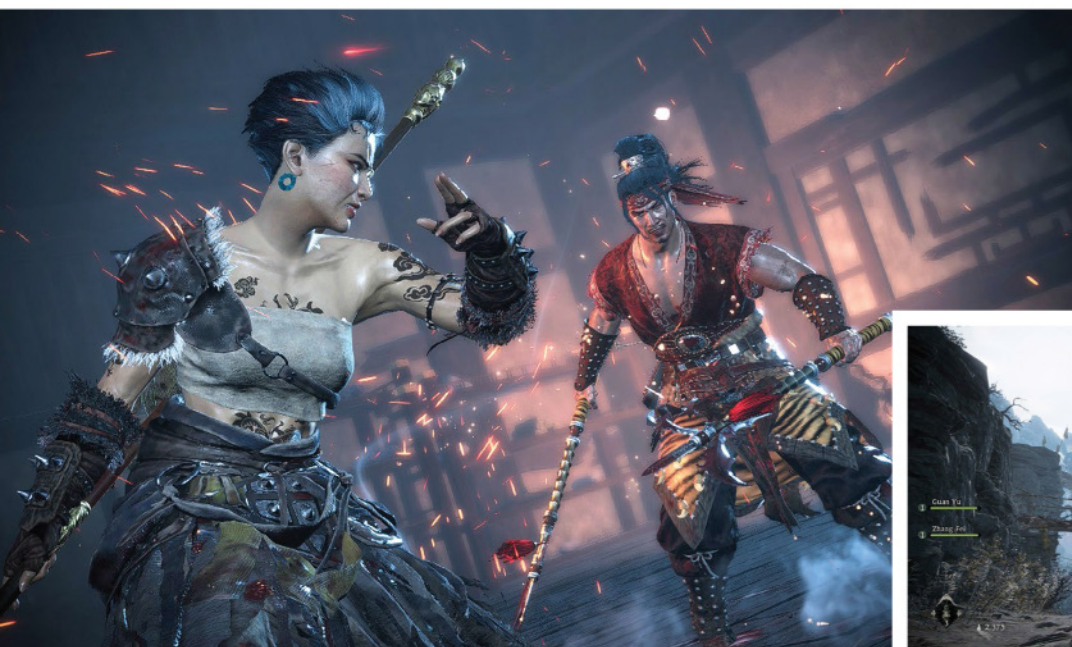
This wouldn't be a Souls-like without a poison sewer.



ABOVE: Just me and the boys here to sort out your demon problem.

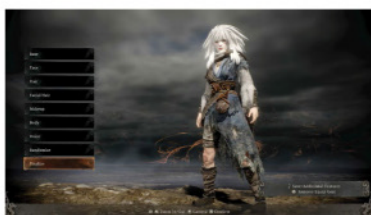
BELOW: *Wo Long's* first boss is a real trial by fire.



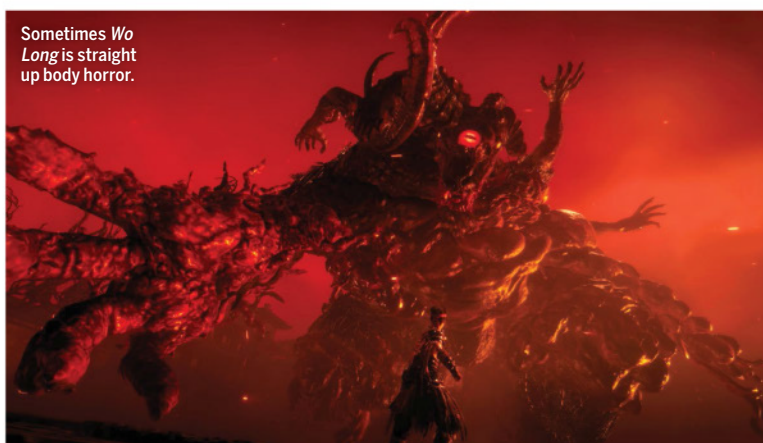


ABOVE: Despite everything happening on-screen, *Wo Long* is surprisingly easy to follow.

RIGHT: There's an absolutely fantastic character creator here to let you go wild.



Sometimes *Wo Long* is straight up body horror.



felt hopeless in *Wo Long*. It might honestly be the peak of the action RPG arc. The time between encountering a seemingly unbeatable foe to absolutely kicking their ass is the shortest loop of its kind I've played. Exhilarating feels inadequate as a description.

FLYING DAGGERS

If it falters in its design, it's in Team Ninja's commitment to doling out heaps of randomly generated loot. I found it impossible to not long for *Elden Ring*'s more bespoke item placement while

organising my inventory to clear out two dozen pairs of Han Officer Trousers. You'll still find special weapons with their own movesets and martial arts special attacks, offering you plenty of unique options, but there's a lot of minutia to pore over, which can become tedious when you're comparing +10 Health with 4.8% Defence.

Mastering combat is only part of the battle – you'll also need to become an avid explorer. Just don't go in expecting the vastness of *Elden Ring*. *Wo Long* has no open world, instead breaking itself up with a central hub (where you'll apply upgrades and get some sidequests) and distinct missions; though there's certainly still a whole lot of game here. It isn't as cool to pick a level off a selection screen as it would be to roam from place to place, but it does mean you can experience a greater number of distinctive areas back to back. You'll be cutting your way across rickety rope bridges spanning deep chasms in one mission, and then find yourself on a snowy battlefield taking on a castle under siege in the next. There are labyrinths made out of shipwrecks and haunted bamboo forests. It's never as wildly fantastical as *Dark Souls*, but its grim battlefields are pleasingly intricate, full of shortcuts and secrets.

Exploration is about more than taking in the sights, though, as every area is littered with not only battle flags that act as your checkpoints but also banners. Raising these increases your morale, buffing your stats and bringing the difficulty down. Your enemies all have a morale level, too, represented by a number that's visible the moment you bump into

them. You can take them on there and then, or explore and give yourself a helping hand. You can even bring down enemy morale by taking out leaders or wizards.

DUDES ROCK

Wo Long separates itself in this theming, emphasising that everyone is part of a larger fight. As well as fully fledged co-op for up to three players (handled through a menu for those who may dislike FromSoftware's more esoteric approach) and competitive invasions, you'll also amass a

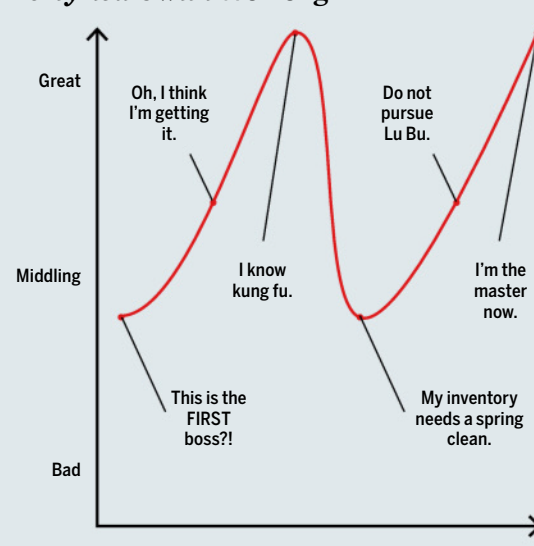
roster of NPC allies to be called upon when needed. You'll even level them up and get extra benefits from growing your bond with them.

These comrades feel like companions in a way FromSoftware's NPC summons never quite managed, as they stand by you each step of the way and share their story. Several missions make them mandatory, and I couldn't help but get attached. Zhao Yun, one of the first heroes to offer their assistance, was my main guy, my best pal. If you know the Three Kingdoms' history, and especially Romance of the Three Kingdoms, be it through *Dynasty Warriors* or myriad other adaptations, their inclusion feels

You'll also amass a roster of NPC allies to be called upon when needed

HIGH KICKS, LOW BLOWS

Forty hours with *Wo Long*



more meaningful. It's fun to see historical characters pop up like a cameo in an Avengers film – albeit with more important roles to play.

Despite the nods to history, *Wo Long* goes hard with the dark fantasy, shaking things up with demons diverting the natural course of history. Its monsters are closer to body horror abominations than they are creatures of myth (fitting given the game's producer, Masaaki Yamagiwa, worked on *Bloodborne*) and the sound of buzzing insects feeding on the corpses of a battlefield genuinely disturbs. *Wo Long* sometimes feels like a mash-up of genres, with romantic heroes caught up in a horror story. Both sides are balanced well, though, and while *Wo Long* never manages to conjure up a mythology or world as captivating as FromSoft's finest, its mix of history, horror and fantasy is compelling.

NOT THAT TARNISHED

A shame then that *Wo Long* is undermined by some technical issues on PC. Framerates generally held at 60fps – there's no unlocked fps option – but in spots there were some dire dips that risked bringing the game to a halt. In addition there were a few visual bugs, like a strange glow that would take over the screen until I reloaded. I also encountered a couple of crashes – not something you really want when every inch of progress is hard won. Tinkering with the settings can boost performance, but there's not much that can be done about the glitches without a patch.

Apart from these technical blemishes, *Wo Long* is an exceptionally accomplished evolution. It doesn't have the same variety as something like *Elden Ring*, but its focus on Wuxia-style martial arts puts it a cut above its peers. It's a game in which challenges feel exciting rather than punishing because the learning curve is so exquisite and mastery feels sublime. Team Ninja has really managed to push the envelope, and lovers of Wuxia cinema and action RPGs had best not miss this one. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Technical issues aside, *Wo Long* is a master of its craft that future *Souls*-likes should study under.

89

DEEP THOUGHTS

LABYRINTH OF GALLERIA is a dizzyingly deep dungeon-crawl from Disgaea's devs

By Dominic Tarason

The PlayStation Vita was an underrated treasure-trove of mid-budget RPGs, and one of the last big releases for it was *Labyrinth of Galleria*, a witchy dungeon crawl and sequel to 2016's *Labyrinth of Refrain* from Disgaea devs Nippon Ichi. *Galleria* has gone unlocalised for some time, making me fear one of the Vita's swansongs would never reach the West.

Fortunately, it's just fashionably late, and has become a personal obsession and a killer app for my Steam Deck.

Labyrinth of Refrain is a 'Blobber' dungeon crawl RPG. A sub-genre famed for putting systems over story.

You navigate a 3D, first-person dungeon with a party of adventurers that behave more like a rolling blob of limbs, swords, spells and numbers. Those familiar with Nippon Ichi's *Disgaea* series

can see the danger here. *Galleria* may start simple, but escalates into maximalist chaos.

You play as a disembodied spirit, summoned by a witch to map out a dungeon with a swarm of expendable wooden puppet familiars. While they've faces, voices and even likes and dislikes, they're not alive, so even if they get dismembered, you can glue them back together.

This provides a clear story/gameplay divide. *Galleria*'s story happens to other people. A cast of witches, peasants and nobles in a Regency-era alternate Europe. They're an interesting, well-voiced bunch, and the story is full of mysteries, twists and shocking reveals, but you can skip it all with a single button if you're just here for the dungeoneering. Still, it's also a pleasantly bespoke setting. No orcs or elves, just esoteric witchery and some positively freaky monsters.

The titular labyrinth is the star of the show, and mapping its dozens of vertically, horizontally and interdimensionally connected floors is deeply compelling. Early tutorialised delves see a small party

finding obstacles at every turn, interrupted by random encounters. Each return to the surface brings new story and powers. First, you can see roaming monsters. Then you gain the ability to jump pits, opening new paths. And then the ability to kick down walls, completely upending the dungeon's layout.

With so many fighters and monsters involved, most encounters in *Galleria* are best left to play out

automatically. Harder fights still require commanding your 'covens' of puppets, or spending a limited pool of magical control to boss around individuals to leverage elemental

You play as a disembodied spirit, summoned by a witch

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A first-person 'Blobber' dungeon crawl from the *Disgaea* devs

EXPECT TO PAY
£45

DEVELOPER
Nippon Ichi Software, Inc

PUBLISHER
NIS America, Inc

REVIEWED ON
Intel i9-9900k, 32GB RAM, Nvidia 2080 Ti + Steam Deck

MULTIPLAYER
None

LINK
nisamerica.com/
labyrinth-of-galleria

weaknesses, status ailments and the ability to stun foes with concussive damage before they can attack.

Galleria rewards curiosity with a seemingly endless array of new places to explore, new monsters to fight and new abilities to unlock. Before long, I was only fighting when I wanted, creating teleporter shortcuts, carving out exit points to the surface and scribbling notes all over the map. Even when I felt I'd seen it all after 40+ hours, *Galleria* blindsided me with a second campaign with wildly different environments, enemies and twists, easily doubling its scope.

PORTABLE PUPPETRY

For those familiar with *Labyrinth of Refrain*, *Galleria* almost entirely supplants it. Once again *Disgaea*'s lead artist and composer give their best, filling the dungeon with delightfully strange monster sprites, largely static but with swishy or bouncy bits animated. The soundtrack is a whimsical assortment of synthesised waltzes and guitar-led battle themes that I'd describe as 'impish', or perhaps 'witchy', adding to its already offbeat aesthetic.

The only area where *Galleria* shows restraint over its predecessor is its horniness. Gone is *Refrain*'s pervasive sexuality. There's still some of it here, but deployed with much more consideration.

With its roots as a Vita game, *Galleria* feels perfect for the Steam Deck. While I'd have liked to see a few more creature types (the late game sees a lot of palette swaps deployed) and a bit more variety in its dungeon tilesets, *Galleria* has kept me engrossed for dozens of hours already, and I've still lots yet to see. ■

INFORMATION OVERLOAD

Key details you might miss



1 VANGUARD/REARGUARD

It's all too easy to accidentally move out of formation. Double-check you've got your squishy casters in the Vanguard.

2 RESONANCE

If your puppets like each other, they'll do more damage when attacking together. Use rapport-building items to improve their friendships.

3 POWER SOURCE

Consumed by some spells. Resonance attacks cause this to go up. The higher it goes, the more resonance attacks happen.

PC GAMER VERDICT

A dizzyingly complex, seemingly endless interconnected dungeon crawl that just begs to be broken.

80



ABOVE: No orcs or elves here. Just... whatever this thing is.

FAR LEFT: Tentacle-owls and faceless puppets patrol this wing of the labyrinth.



BELOW: Madame Marta is equal parts Nanny Ogg and Granny Weatherwax.



EASTWORLD

ATOMIC HEART is a beautiful, flawed, and deeply weird Soviet Westworld

By Rich Stanton

Four or five hours into *Atomic Heart*, it swings into one of many seamless first-person cutscenes. A man points a gun at you, babbles something about a giant plant, and your protagonist gruffly swears, complains and sets about fetching the thing to blow up the thing. You return with explosives, which are ignited by a cigarette while your character calls the plant a “fuckbag”, and the scientist dies afterwards. I didn’t know whether to laugh or cry.

A lot of *Atomic Heart* will leave you grasping for purchase, as it free-wheelingly veers from enormous set pieces to endless fetch quests, as critiques of Russian exceptionalism rub up against a protagonist who calls robots “fat turds” and a script written with the help of a swearing thesaurus. You’ll gaze into the eerie, porcelain face of an android and marvel at how well the aesthetic captures this unsettling world of humanoid robots, and then be grossed-out by a vending machine begging you to “squirt your polymer in me”.

This is one of the oddest big-budget games I’ve played in a long time, filled with as many good ideas as bad ones, like it’s been made without a filter and everything went

in. The game’s influences are numerous – *Westworld*, *Fallout*, Arkane’s *Prey* – but the one that looms above them all is *BioShock*.

Atomic Heart’s narrative-focused opening is like a communist version of Columbia and the grandeur of its sprawling research institute, a utopia-gone-wrong showcasing the best of retro-futurist Soviet robotics, makes for one breathtaking vista after another. But the influence runs far deeper than aesthetic.

Combat is built around a plasmid equivalent, several lifted straight from *BioShock*, while the narrative style of first-person talking heads, radio logs, and companions is straight from the Irrational playbook. *Atomic Heart* almost pulls it off.

This is one of the oddest big-budget games I’ve played

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A narrative FPS with light RPG elements set in a Russian Westworld

EXPECT TO PAY
£55

DEVELOPER
Mundfish

PUBLISHER
Focus Entertainment, 4Divinity

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i5-12400F, 16GB RAM, GeForce RTX 2060

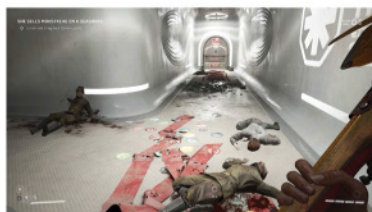
MULTIPLAYER
No
LINK
mundfish.com

THE ONE-TWO PUNCH

Atomic Heart benefits from the tried-and-tested nature of these techniques, but it suffers from the fact it’s so indebted to a very famous, very striking FPS from 16 years ago.

BioShock starts you off with a wrench and an electric shock attack, and *Atomic Heart* does more or less the same but with an axe. The difference is that *Atomic Heart*’s electric shock feels... well, like it’s just giving things a tickle. The combat has fairly standard basics (a melee weapon, a pistol, a shotgun, a grenade launcher) but is nuanced by some great individual twists, like the zappy pistol you can upgrade into a death-dealing chargeable shock beam. You can customise your weapons into various damage types (electrical damage for robots, bleed damage for organic foes) and secondary effects like knockback or AoE. But ultimately no matter how you choose to skin *Atomic Heart*’s android enemies, combat lacks the heft of its inspirations.

One reason for this is how hard *Atomic Heart* leans into collecting and crafting. Throughout the game you’re wearing a sentient super-glove,



ABOVE: Several boss fights feature incredibly frustrating QTEs that can see you one-shot.

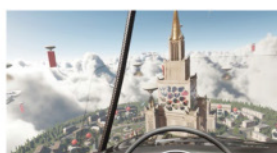




Atomic Heart occasionally swings into the surreal for brief sequences.



ABOVE: The animation on the android foes is often top class.



FAR RIGHT: Creativity outside of combat is rarely necessary here.

and everything you point it at will open and the goodies will zoom towards you. Remember the scene in *Ghostbusters* where the library cards start flying out of the drawers? In *Atomic Heart* you trigger this effect constantly and so far it hasn't gotten old. In fact I enjoy it so much I think opening space cupboards individually in *Starfield* is going to drive me mad.

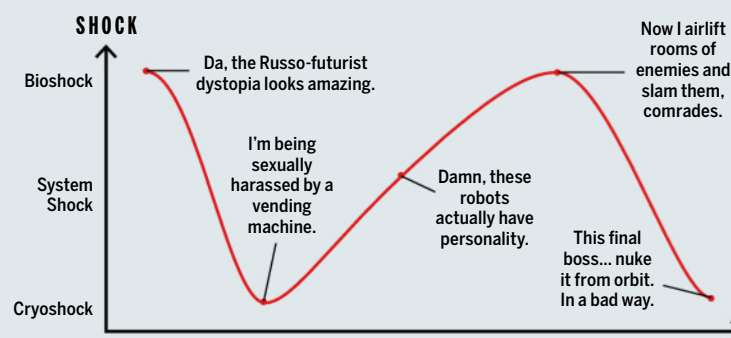
You can similarly schloop the resources out of downed foes (whose bodies or parts convulse as the bits fly out), and whatever you're looting there's a lovely glimpse of the shiny bits flying towards you: you instantly have a sense when you've scored something good. This side of it is a delight. But using all this junk to painstakingly build and upgrade weapons means most of your equipment and attacks are unimpressive until you can grind enough loot to give them more oomph. I saw no point building a new tool or weapon without having the resources to immediately upgrade it several times.

The game pretty much acknowledges this by including a system that refunds all resources for deconstructing any item. The idea is clearly that players should swap around and experiment with playstyles, but the cumbersome interface and its tiny icons mean the process is no pleasure, and most of the enemies don't encourage or demand this flexibility. The one



SHOCK FACTOR

The chaotic pulse of Atomic Heart





➤ occasion I did do this was to build a specific weapon for an annoying boss, and it worked, but I didn't especially like the weapon and ended up just deconstructing it again after the fight.

ABOVE: Your glove, Charles, delivers much of the game's exposition.

IDEAS STATION

This is *Atomic Heart* writ large. It's bursting with ideas, and some of them are great and some are ballast that only end up making the good stuff weaker. Despite my criticisms of the upgrade paths the combat is often exciting and tense, and some of the effects you can pull off – such as lifting half a dozen androids into the air, chain-electrocuting the lot, then smashing them down on the ground and launching a rocket – both look and feel fantastic.

But this combat system never quite hits the heights it promises. It's like all the ingredients are there but the cake's still that tiny bit underbaked. Towards the end of *BioShock* and its sequels you feel like an all-powerful terror, a genetic monstrosity that swats splicers like flies. In *Atomic Heart* your power level amps up without ever reaching that point of potency.

In terms of how you actually navigate this place, *Atomic Heart* offers one memorable and well-used idea: a viscous goop that your character can swim through in order to move vertically around certain environments. This weird-looking substance snakes around

ATOMIC PARTS

This is how we roll in Soviet dystopia

20%
It is a ton of fun making things fly out of drawers with your hand.

30%
I'm powered-up and now this game might be amazing?



20%
"God damn another fetch quest, better complain about fetch quests!"

15%
Seriously, vending machine, I am not interested in sex with you.

10%
If this boss kills me one more time I quit.

5%
This dead person's more charming than anyone alive here.

certain locales, often asking you to swim loops high above, and provides some magnificent perspectives on these environments. It's a standout idea both mechanically and visually, and the ability to hop out at any point along the tube lets you get creative with it.

SOVIETSHOCK

Atomic Heart has been the subject of recent controversy in the context of the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war, with its developers being Russian (though based in Cyprus) and the sources of its funding being questioned. Some critics suggest that *Atomic Heart* represents Russian soft power, and buying it would be some sort of implicit support for the war.

Whatever one can say about the funding, this game is not a propaganda piece. In the same way that *Fallout* embraces

Atomic-age Americana in order to oft-savagely critique American capitalism and culture, this is a Russian critique of Russian exceptionalism. The opening hours of course include sights and spectacles meant to echo the grandeur of the Soviet Communist Party's public events, where thousands of soldiers march beneath the hammer and sickle or a news report boasts of a technological advance made by comrades.

Things then begin to unravel. No one is quite who they seem to be, and

the various layers of Soviet bureaucracy in this fictional Russia are locked in an internecine war and undermining each other (all the while comparing themselves to America, naturally). You can't criticise or send-up something like Russia's political system and nostalgia for the past without including the reasons why Russians may feel some misplaced fondness for the days of grand parades and 'strong' Soviet leaders – all that hollow spectacle in *Atomic Heart* is there to be chipped away to expose the rot underneath.

Atomic Heart arrives at a time where its critique of Soviet glory is unavoidably contextualised by what

Russia is currently doing in the real world. The game on the one hand pines for the era where Russia led the space race, and the names of its cosmonauts travelled the world, and on the other is clear-eyed

about what kind of system that was, and how its principles are still being used to subjugate a population under the guise of comradeship. I can't imagine finishing this game and thinking it's presenting Russia as some wonderland ruled by wise people for the common good.

That probably makes *Atomic Heart* seem a more impressive narrative achievement than it is. There are lofty themes here and some memorable story beats, but also a bunch of ridiculous characters and set pieces that come and go in the

blink of an eye, and too much of the narrative is delivered in minute-long monologues by your glove while other things are happening.

STALK THIS

Atomic Heart is a surprising, ambitious, deeply flawed game that at times feels close to greatness. It will take your breath away with a set piece one minute, then make you spend the next ten fiddling with an annoying puzzle while the protagonist swears about how annoying this puzzle is. It's unbelievably crass in one breath, then delivers a cogent summary of contemporary issues around AI the next. I have no doubt it'll become some sort of cult classic among a particular type of FPS player.

Inspiration is always a double-edged sword because of the comparison it invites, and *Atomic Heart* has been heavily inspired by the past. What lies beneath its glossy exterior, though, is an all-too-human sadness about the future of technological servitude it envisions. This game has moments of frustration alongside the wonder, and in some areas pales in comparison to those inspirations, but it is always reaching for the stars. Even if *Atomic Heart* never quite fully grasps them, that has to count for something. ■

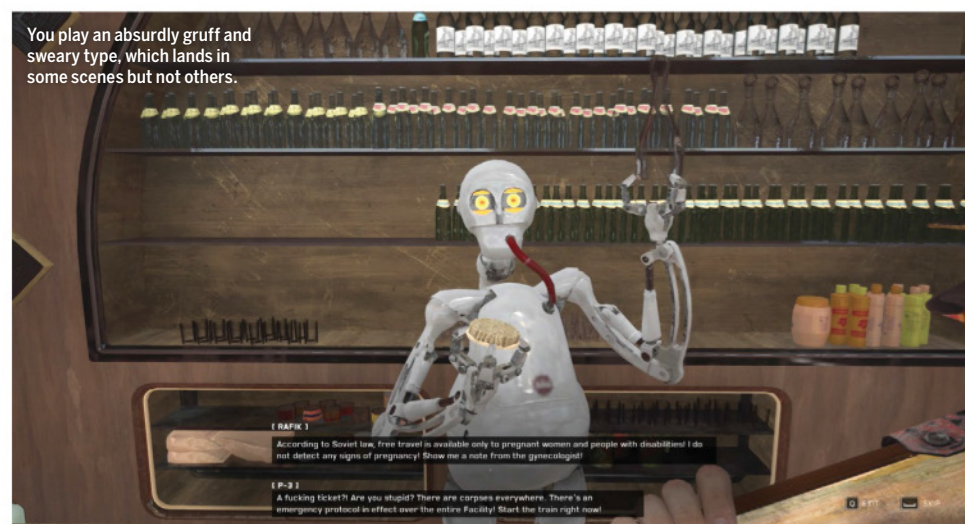
PC GAMER VERDICT

Atomic Heart is ambitious and gorgeous, but boils down to a tonally inconsistent Soviet *BioShock*.

78



ABOVE: A nice touch is the presence of safe rooms a la *Resident Evil*.



You play an absurdly gruff and weary type, which lands in some scenes but not others.

BULLET LIMBO

RETURNAL is a roguelike shooter at war with its own identity

By Robin Valentine

In 1996, Housemarque released *Super Stardust*, and for two decades it honed the top-down arcade shooter. In 2017, it declared “ARCADE IS DEAD” – there was no money left in it, and the developer would be “moving on to new genres”. *Returnal* is the result, a big budget roguelike that kicks off a new era for the studio. The twist? It’s... basically an arcade shooter.

OK, that’s a little unfair. Strictly speaking, it’s a third-person roguelike shooter – the camera tight over your shoulder, not high above, with runs progressing you through a shifting alien world, rather than being an opportunity to chase high scores. But the more you play, the more it feels like a wolf in sheep’s clothing, using some of the trappings of a popular modern genre to smuggle in the gameplay Housemarque is more known for. It’s a game with one foot in the studio’s past and another in its future.

Things kick off with an astronaut – Selene – crash-landing on the alien planet of Atropos. After some fraught encounters with the hostile wildlife, she discovers she’s trapped in a time loop – if she dies, she simply wakes up again at the crash site. It’s a perfect narrative setup for a roguelike, contextualising your repeated runs through Atropos’ dangerous levels as part of a continuous story – similar to *Deathloop* or particularly *Hades*.

Each run consists of a series of rooms – some containing loot, secrets and traps, but most bursting with furious enemies. Combat is fast, frantic and deadly, a furious, leaping dance of aliens and projectiles. Survival means always being on the move, and avoiding getting hit at all costs so you can maintain your vital Adrenaline – a stacking buff that vanishes if you lose any health.

SUPER LOOPER

It’s exhilarating stuff, chaotic enough to always keep your blood pumping,

but precise enough to demand mastery. And more than just showing Housemarque’s strengths as a studio with a long history of skill-based games, it specifically evokes arcade shooters. Projectiles are big and slow-moving, but frequently fill the screen – it very much feels like a third-person take on bullet hell as you weave between shots. Alt-fire modes on your guns feel like arcade power-ups, launching waves of

shots or blazing beams.

Even the visuals evoke a meeting of two worlds. The alien landscape is bleak and weird, taking clear inspiration from the *Alien* films. But against that quiet, creepy backdrop, combat is an explosion of noise and light, a barrage of neon bullets and blasts straight out of *Super Stardust*. Even two years on from *Returnal*’s original launch on PS5, the combination is visually stunning.

Elsewhere, unfortunately, the game struggles to find a similar balance. Despite the roguelike

structure, there’s a clear reluctance to let the RPG elements common to the genre have too much effect on the very skill-based combat. There’s almost no persistent progression, and even within a run, boons that you earn frequently feel minor. The result is that it’s very possible to die after 40 minutes of play having made no progress at all in your overall goal.

Runs are full of risk/reward decisions – should you open this chest, knowing it might give you a debuff? Should you enter this challenge room, attempting a tough fight for extra rewards? The problem is, because of that focus on skill over RPG progression, the rewards are usually meagre, and the risk is often too harsh. Combat is too punishing for it to be worth rolling the dice.

It’s particularly grating once you reach one of the game’s bosses. Each one is a glorious bullet hell fever dream, and beating them necessitates learning their attacks and practicing the appropriate dodges and counters, often with lots of trial and error. During an attempt it’s a blast, but the roguelike structure means it can take hours to get yourself ready for another go. After all that, you could still die in a few hits, and be right back at square one.

When you’re bouncing between platforms, blasting aliens and dashing through their attacks, it looks and feels excellent. But actually making progress demands far more patience than is really fair to ask. A certain breed of dedicated gaming masochist will revel in *Returnal*’s unwavering challenge, but I suspect most will wish there were more meaningful RPG elements, or that it was simply a series of score-attack levels without all that padding in between. ■

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A roguelike third-person shooter with a strong bullet hell lineage

EXPECT TO PAY
£50

DEVELOPER
Housemarque

PUBLISHER
PlayStation PC

REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen 9 5900X,
32GB RAM, Nvidia
GeForce RTX 3080

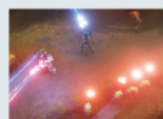
MULTIPLAYER
Co-op only

LINK
[housemarque.com/
games/returnal](https://housemarque.com/games/returnal)

Chaotic enough to always keep your blood pumping

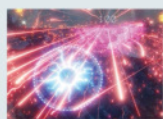
SHMUP TO DATE

“Arcade is dead!”



**ALIENATION
2016**

This PS4 exclusive tried to combine arcade shooting with loot and co-op.



**NEX MACHINA
2017**

Iconic developer Eugene Jarvis led the way on this top-down shooter.



**MATTERFALL
2017**

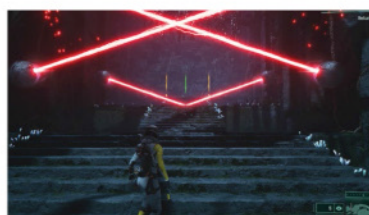
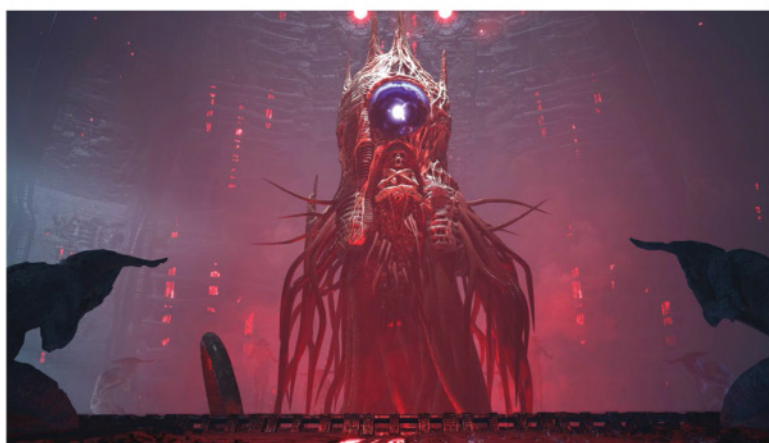
Matterfall added some elements of 2D platforming to the formula.

PC GAMER VERDICT

Demanding but excellent combat and gorgeous visuals sit awkwardly in a half-baked roguelike structure.

74

Selene has a casual approach to attaching bio-organic alien tech to herself.



FAR LEFT: The boss monsters are wonderfully weird and grotesque.

LEFT: Goodies are often hidden behind deadly traps.

BELOW: Just an average day in Bullet Hell.



CLUB MED

COMPANY OF HEROES 3 is a fantastic RTS with a main campaign that just doesn't work

By Fraser Brown

World War II looms large at all times. Even when we're looking for some videogame escapism, it's there, deafening us with the cacophony of artillery and exploding tanks. For *Company of Heroes 3*, however, Relic has taken us further south, to Italy and the desert of North Africa. And a lot has changed since the previous games, with the studio's ambition and desire for experimentation growing.

This is something new, but it's not the novelties that have impressed me the most. It's a beast of a game, cramming in two campaigns and four factions. Its proportions are fitting for this massive conflict. The main course, ostensibly, is the Italian campaign – promising something akin to a World War II *Total War*.

From Sicily to Rome, you'll push your way north, fighting the Nazis in random skirmishes and incredible bespoke missions. It's a huge turn-based campaign that serves up a slew of spectacular, tactically interesting RTS battles, and it should be the most exciting thing Relic has ever done. Lamentably, this is not the case due to the absence of one crucial ingredient: it isn't remotely dynamic.

Across my nearly 40-hour march to Rome, I encountered hardly any resistance at all. The only time my adversary attempted to take back a town I'd captured, it was a scripted event. Aside from that, the Nazis seemed resigned to let me keep everything I'd claimed. Regardless of the difficulty settings, aggression is a foreign concept to them.

If one of your companies encounters an enemy company, they'll probably try to attack you after you've finished your turn, so they are at least willing to defend their territory, but they never go beyond that. This renders the campaign largely pointless, turning it into a perfunctory saunter. You'll be told to defend towns and build emplacements to help with this, but

doing so is a waste of companies and resources when the enemy will never venture south.

PYRRHIC VICTORY

Serves up a slew of tactically interesting RTS battles

This is especially frustrating when it's clear how great it actually could have been. And even in this seemingly unfinished state, good ideas bubble to the surface, if you can push past the very rough UI and

impotent opponent.

Each company you requisition is a powerful toolkit that contains not just a distinct selection of units you'll field in the RTS scraps, but also a range of abilities that help on the campaign map. The Indian Artillery Company, for instance, can bombard enemy positions, softening up towns, removing emplacements, blowing up bridges and weakening enemy companies. So there are a lot of

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A WWII RTS with two campaigns

EXPECT TO PAY
£50

DEVELOPER
Relic Entertainment

PUBLISHER
Sega

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-8086K,
16GB RAM, GeForce
RTX 3080 Ti

MULTIPLAYER
Yes
LINK
companyofheroes.com

targets to destroy, but also lots of opportunities to build.

Along with the emplacements you can pointlessly cover Italy in, conquest provides yet more things to spend your resources on. Capture an airfield and you can start sending out reconnaissance planes to remove the fog of war, or bombers to prepare targets for a ground assault. Capturing ports, meanwhile, increases your population cap and gives you more ships, which can strike at enemy targets from the sea. These give you a lot of options for how to approach every assault.

There's also an elegance to the way *Company of Heroes 3* makes its twin layers approachable and logical – each being a reflection of the other. So those ships and planes that can rain down hell on things on the campaign map also appear as abilities in the RTS battles.

Significantly less elegant are the campaign progression systems, which are a bit of a tangled mess. Companies gain experience from battle, whether it's a proper RTS fight, an auto-resolved scrap or just blowing up a bunker on the map, and from that experience you get a hefty supply of skill points, which in turn must be spent across three distinct systems: Abilities, Upgrades and Units. There's too much to comfortably prioritise, especially when you're juggling lots of different companies, and they just don't fit together very well – even visually. The UI for each is completely different, as is the order in which you unlock things. It just feels like I'm dabbling in something that's still in the concept phase.

So the Italian campaign is not the slam dunk I was hoping for, but I find myself less disappointed than expected. I was anticipating something grand, something evocative of *Total War*, and it doesn't remotely live up to this – but what it does is spit out incredible fight after incredible fight. So many highs, thrills

FRIENDS WITH BENEFITS

Get to know your subcommander advisors



GENERAL BUCKRAM

Buckram is a brash US general who wants to push north to Rome as quickly as possible. His bonuses are focused on air support.



GENERAL NORTON

Norton of the Brits is more cautious than his American counterpart, encouraging a slow and steady approach to war.



ELEONORA VALENTI

Valenti is the voice of the partisans and wants you to consider the Italians as you fight over their country. Also helps you with intel.



FAR LEFT: It might not be completely safe here, lads.

LEFT: Flamethrower-wielding engineers are endlessly fun.

BELOW: I feel bad about all the chaos I've introduced to sleepy Italian towns.





ABOVE: Every tank is absurdly detailed, and boy are there a lot of them.

FAR RIGHT: Let's go on a brisk jog through the apocalypse.

BELOW: Tanks and fire are a winning combination.



and, god, the explosions are impeccable. Pristine maps turned into hellish crater-filled nightmares, buildings crumbling, tank husks smouldering, men running around on fire – it's appalling but exciting.

Here, in the RTS layer, we see real dynamism. And it even gives a glimmer of dynamism to the campaign map, where bombing the shit out of a location before you head into battle transforms it, pitting the ground and destroying buildings – which can have a dramatic impact on the ensuing fight. Once you enter the map, though, that's when you become a proper terraformer, remaking and deconstructing Italy's towns and countryside. The terrain reflects the decisions you make as you strategically take out anywhere Nazis might be hiding.

The Hedgerow Hell and frosty Russian maps of *Company of Heroes 1* and 2 remain RTS high points, but Italy has spawned some of my favourite fighting spots. Narrow roads surrounded by tall buildings, hiding snipers and machine-gun teams; winding countryside paths, where anti-tank guns hide behind every corner; the terrifying expanse of an airfield runway, where cover is a luxury and death seems perpetually imminent – even the memories of these encounters is enough to get my heart thudding like an artillery strike.

GOOD COMPANY

Between the big missions are countless random skirmishes, and given the length of the campaign I was worried they might start to get a bit stale. That didn't prove to be the case, not just because the skirmish maps and objectives are numerous, but because each type of company has a different playstyle and different toys to play with, keeping things exciting even 40 hours in.

The tactical pause system makes getting to grips with each company, and the units within them, a lot easier, giving you the space to set up and coordinate more elaborate attacks, or create a chain of orders. You can take all the time you need to throw down some smoke grenades, move your gun crews into position, call down an airstrike and send some brave lads into a fortified building to

breach it, before unpausing the action and watching it all play out like a deadly ballet.

The much brisker North African campaign is *Company of Heroes* at its more traditional – a linear series of eight missions that sees you commanding the Deutsches Afrikakorps (DAK) and taking your orders from Rommell.

Narratively it's a weird one, attempting to balance the discomfort of playing as historical villains by interspersing it with the stories and perspective of Jewish Berbers fighting against the Nazis, or living in occupied areas. The attempt to tell less well-known stories is a welcome one, but it feels awkwardly stitched together and is, ultimately, focused on people who only exist in mostly static cutscenes.

While the campaign's storytelling lacks impact, the missions themselves are a pleasantly diverse bunch, running the gamut from huge, multi-phase epic confrontations with offensive and defensive portions to smaller, focused scenarios where you're setting up traps for convoys or hunting down tank commanders.

The North African maps are also a big change of pace from their Italian counterparts. The frequency of the wide open spaces initially makes them seem less tactical, but they are perfect for the DAK, a faction that's all about tanks. The desert really lets these behemoths rip, in turn emphasising some of *Company of Heroes 3*'s new features, like tank riding and side armour. Tanks are more versatile, but also require a bit more micromanagement, blessing these fights with more tension, even as you ride into battle with the deadliest of monsters.

INFINITY WAR

Together, the two campaigns give you plenty of battles, but the multiplayer and skirmish modes extend that further, letting you fight other players or go on a comp stomp as one of the four factions. This quartet can then be further specialised in-game by picking specific battlegroup upgrade paths that reflect the companies of the campaigns.

The campaign AI, at least in the RTS layer, is serviceable if conservative, so it's really in multiplayer where the depth of *Company of Heroes 3*'s strategy is truly revealed, and where its most exciting confrontations are found. Fourteen maps are already in play, and mod support means we should see more appear courtesy of the community after launch. I expect to spend a lot of time here now that I've finished my tour of duty in the campaigns, and have already had a blast blowing up my fellow critics.

Company of Heroes 3 is a hard game to render a verdict on. Patches may improve the Italian campaign, but right now it's impossible to look at it as anything other than a failure. Yet I've had weeks of fun with the RTS, and can't wait to keep playing as more players enter the battlefield at launch. It is a flawed experiment that has nonetheless provided me with real-time brawls that I simply cannot get enough of – I love it. If you're willing to accept that the campaign is just a vehicle for fantastic battles, I think you might love it too. ■

COMPANY MEN

The factions you'll be playing with



US FORCES

A versatile faction that lets you make surprise attacks from above thanks to strong air support, and paratroopers who charge in under the cover of smokescreens.



BRITISH FORCES

This is a flexible faction that brings in units from around the world, like the Gurkhas and Indian artillery. The strong infantry, weapon teams and heavy tanks are also very welcome.



WEHRMACHT

The Luftwaffe gives the Wehrmacht air support comparable to the US Forces' Airborne battlegroup, but this faction's big hook is that it is heavily mechanised.



AFRIKAKORPS

With a mix of German and Italian units, the Deutsches Afrikakorps is an agile, mechanised force with a bounty of tanks and vehicles, the pinnacle of which is the ridiculously tough Tiger tank.

PC GAMER VERDICT

Company of Heroes 3 is an incredible RTS that manages to shine even when the main campaign doesn't.

82

DEAD STRANGE

Not everyone will want to read **WANTED: DEAD'S** love letter to 2000s action games

By Mollie Taylor

Wanted: Dead would have totally banged in the late 2000s. It's a no-nonsense hack-and-slash with some sickeningly wicked dismemberment, B-tier voice acting, and heaps of jank. It's exactly what developer Soleil was aiming for, backed by several ex-Ninja Gaiden and Dead or Alive workers. But in the year of our lord 2023, its unapologetic vision isn't going to sit right with everybody.

Unfortunately, I'm one of those people. I'm a huge Team Ninja lover and a regular Dead or Alive defender, so I was excited to dive into the Hong Kong Police Department's Zombie Squad, a group of former criminals. You take on the role of Hannah Stone, and Wanted:

Dead's flimsy narrative is played out across a number of missions.

They're linear, which I dig. But the structure of each level is uninspired and samey. Waves of enemies are dotted between sporadically placed checkpoints, most of them identical in how they attack and move. Gun-wielding enemies can be easily rushed, while a number of melee enemies offer different challenges. Then there are your brutes who deal

big damage and require precise timing with parries. Most of them are easy enough to deal with in isolation but become frustrating to fight in larger numbers.

Stone can deal with enemies through a mixture of melee and gun combat. She can slash and parry with her katana, stagger enemy movement with a handgun or go classic third-person shooter behind cover. When it flows, the combat feels great. Wanted: Dead is full of gloriously gory finishing moves that never get old.

Wanted: Dead is full of gory finishing moves that never get old

FEELING BAD

Sadly, the game feels bad more than it feels good. The majority of guns feel atrocious to handle – outside of Stone's standard rifle and a droppable

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A hack-and-slash inspired by janky 2000s action games

EXPECT TO PAY
£50

DEVELOPER
Soleil Limited

PUBLISHER
110 Industries SA

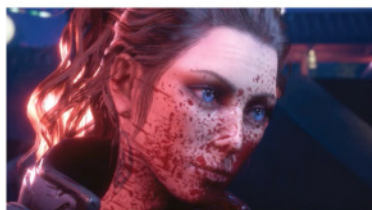
REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen 7 2700X,
16GB RAM, Nvidia
GeForce RTX 3070

MULTIPLAYER
No
LINK
wanteddeadgame.com

shotgun, handling, aiming and actually hitting enemies is awful. The cover system is riddled with jank, with Stone occasionally not going into cover and often failing to peek around higher walls, planting her cheek against them and leaving me unable to aim. For a combat system that's so painfully one-dimensional, it could've at least been more polished.

It doesn't help that there's never any sense of getting stronger. Stone feels as weak at the end of the game as she does at the beginning, only loosely aided by a super-simple skill tree. Many of the abilities felt like things Stone should have had from the start, like being able to do a finishing move on a dismembered enemy or parrying twice.

All of this is capped off by some truly atrocious checkpointing. The final mission in particular gave me a ton of grief, forcing me to repeatedly battle through roughly 15 minutes of a total gauntlet. Several waves of enemies, some including minibosses, before giving me one final miniboss right before the checkpoint. It stopped being fun and became incredibly frustrating, especially with so few ways to regenerate health.



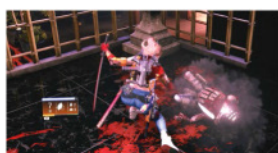
ABOVE: Dismemberment is one of the few things that makes Wanted: Dead's combat satisfying.



Doc expressing my feelings for Wanted: Dead in one sentence.

Doc: I genuinely don't give a fuck.

Chapter 3 is *Wanted: Dead*'s strong point, the only time Stone ever feels powerful.



ABOVE: That's a lot of blood for one heavily armoured grunt.

FAR RIGHT: Take charge throughout the story as Lieutenant Hannah Stone.



On the bright side, there weren't many performance issues getting in the way or making the fights even harder. I experienced the odd frame drop and texture loading issue, but most of the game ran smoothly on the highest graphics setting. There were some bugs though, like music stopping mid-encounter or menus failing to disappear when I unpaused.

Above all, *Wanted: Dead* simply makes no sense. Its narrative is unfinished and nonsensical, with dialogue delivered so woodenly that I had to wonder if half of them had ever spoken a word before. Cutscenes dragged out horrendously, regularly taking two or three minutes to tell absolutely zero story. Outside of missions, you're randomly thrown minigames like karaoke, ramen eating and crane games that turn it into a diet *Yakuza*-like.

Wanted: Dead is too janky to happily exist in mainstream gaming in 2023. But it'll definitely strike a chord with a niche audience – one I'm not a part of. Soleil had a vision, and it certainly achieved it. *Wanted: Dead* won't be for everybody, but for those who it is for, they'll have a good-ass time with it. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Wanted: Dead is an intentionally messy throwback that some people will adore while others lament.

60



LIKE A DRAGON...?

Wanted: Dead's *Yakuza*-like minigames – they're not good



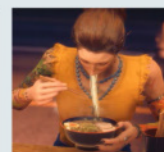
KARAOKE

The only minigame I could stomach without screaming. They really got their money's worth getting Stefanie Joosten (*MGS V*'s Quiet) to sing 99 Luftballons.



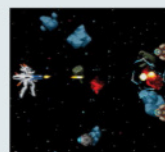
CRANE GAME

Even the goddamn crane game is pure jank, but I do love a good crane machine. Grabbing figurines by their legs? No. Grab them by their puny little heads? Great success.



RAMEN MUKBANG

Like a rhythm game, but worse. No fun music, no 99 Luftballons. Just endless bowls of ramen to chow down on by mashing button inputs. No end in sight.



SPACE RUNAWAY

I've never enjoyed side-scrolling shooters. *Space Runaway* is no different. You can grab it as a fully standalone game on Steam, though. If you like that sort of thing.

SLASH FICTION

LIKE A DRAGON: ISHIN! transforms Yakuza into a period drama

By Dominic Tarason

The *Yakuza* series (now *Like A Dragon*, matching its Japanese naming) has always had a flair for the dramatic, featuring digitised actors, expressive facial capture and stories befitting a good mid-budget TV thriller. With the release of *Like A Dragon: Ishin!*, the series doubles down on its inspirations with a period drama spinoff, recasting Kiryu and crew in a 1860s samurai story and delivering a fresh theme, but perhaps over-familiar fun.

There's been some buzz surrounding *Ishin*, most of it from fans who were sure it would never come to the West. Originally a 2014 PS3 Japanese-exclusive, the version arriving now on PC (and simultaneously worldwide) is a largely-faithful remake, making some mechanical tweaks, re-casting some roles and giving it a graphical touch-up but not making any sweeping changes. This puts it in an unusual place. While the series races ahead into new territory (including going turn-based with *Yakuza 7*), this is a decade-old game dressed up for a modern showing. One foot in the past, but with a few modern niceties.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Old doesn't mean bad, though. If you've ever played a *Yakuza* game before, then *Ishin* is like putting on a warm and cosy (if slightly stretched) sweater, or perhaps a yukata. There's a town to explore (Kyo, now known as Kyoto), lots of weird locals to befriend, eateries to visit and street thugs to pummel into contrition. The core cast of past *Yakuza* games return, playing largely analogous historical roles.

He might be called Ryoma Sakamoto here, but this is unmistakably best boy Kiryu with a new haircut and the same knack for conveying the full spectrum of human emotion with a manly grunt.

It's intentional typecasting in the same way that Danny Trejo is nearly the same character in almost every

role he's played. The character may be similar, but the scope of *Ishin*'s story is a bit more ambitious than the usual *Yakuza* standard. The 1860s were a busy time in Japanese history, with imperial loyalist uprisings, power struggles between the fractious de-facto government and the looming threat of Dutch and British encroachment, and Ryoma juggles personal stakes in all

of the above. It's an utterly grand platform for all of the actors to shine, and the performances are gripping, especially during the main story cutscenes.

The differences in characters are interesting too, with Soji Okita (a historical reimagining of *Yakuza* favourite Goro Majima) getting to play a far more menacing and violent role with familiar stab-happy glee. Ryoma himself may share Kiryu's heart of gold, but he's a more worldly and focused figure, less naïve and confused by

**This is
unmistakably
best boy
Kiryu with a
new haircut**

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Drama, brawler, RPG, life-sim. More *Yakuza*, basically

EXPECT TO PAY
£50

DEVELOPER
Ryu Ga Gotoku Studio

PUBLISHER
Sega

REVIEWED ON
Intel i9-9900k, 32GB RAM, GeForce 2080 Ti

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
ishin.sega.com

his surroundings than his modern-day counterpart.

Thanks to starting small and focused and offering a glossary of terms for reference, *Ishin* works as an easy starting point for the series, as it's an entirely standalone, self-contained story. What newcomers are getting here is a game of two halves. On one hand, *Ishin* is an episodic period thriller. A murder mystery to be precise, set in the tail end of the samurai era. It's full of compelling (subtitled Japanese) performances and dramatic twists and punctuated with real-time brawler combat similar to *Shenmue*. On the other hand, it's a slightly rough-edged man-about-town simulator, setting you loose on a small but incredibly dense city full of weird locals, minigames and distractions, linked through lightweight RPG mechanics – levels, skill trees and loot.

There's a little tonal whiplash where these two halves meet, as a high-pressure dash across town to catch a fleeing villain can easily be interrupted by a visibly lower-budget sidequest (seldom featuring voice acting or cutscenes), but it's a formula that has worked for ten games already, and will continue to do so. Even as I resolved to burn through the main story to hit my looming review deadline, I still frequently lost hours to spend idly bumbling around the city of Kyo, getting roped into minigames and side stories.

MASS DISTRACTION

Compared to your *Grand Theft Rows* or your *Elder Fallouts*, the world of *Ishin* might seem tiny, but it's hard to go 30 seconds without finding something or someone interesting to get sidetracked by. While the sidequests might not be as polished as the main story arc, they're far more varied, running the tonal gamut from tragedy to screwball comedy, and frequently involving unpredictable minigames, but more often than not leaning on

LOVE IS COMPLICATED

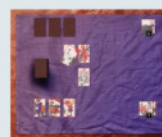
Ishin turns a brothel visit into a minigame



1 The first step in courting a comely courtesan: Competitive drinking.



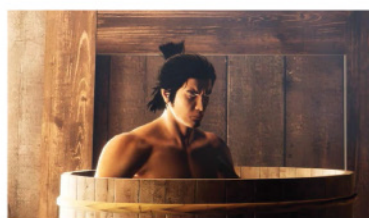
2 Next, to best her five times in the fabled arena of strip rock-paper-scissors.



3 And finally do the deed... in the form of an abstract distraction-dismissing shmup.



Minigames abound as Ryoma gets roped into yet another job.



LEFT: Quick, the editors are away! Post bathtub Ryoma!



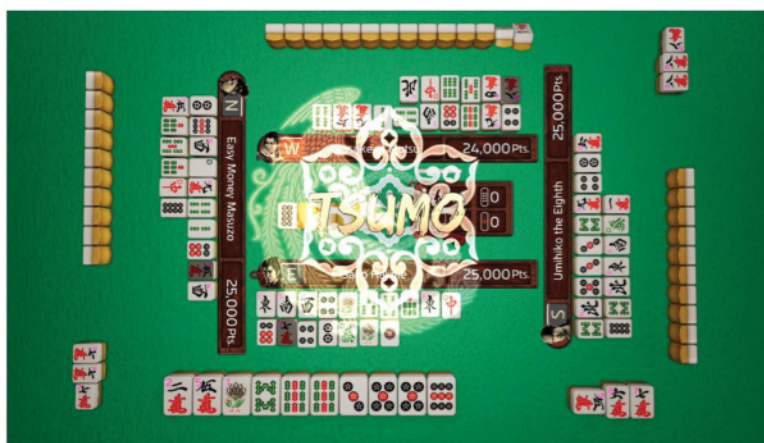
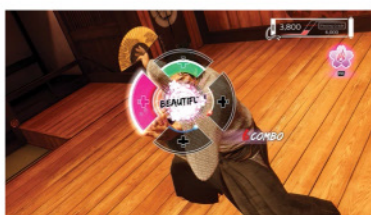
BELOW: Four guns against two swords. Poor odds for the gunmen.





FAR RIGHT: Where the Shinsengumi go, carnage often follows.

BELOW: Don't worry, he'll be fine in the next scene.



✚ *Ishin's* combat engine. Its fights are lent additional energy by the series' traditional guitar-heavy action themes, anachronistic as it may be here.

Once again familiar to series fans, *Ishin's* action combat lets you freely switch between four different fighting styles. In this case, there's barehanded brawling (best for evasion), traditional samurai swordplay (huge damage, high commitment), trick-shooting with a revolver (ranged, obviously), and a hybrid sword-and-gun style that blends elements of all three for spectacular combos but lower overall damage.

While initially a bit stiff and limiting until you unlock more moves, I had a good time once I'd bulked up Ryoma's swordfighting style a little, and got a hang of what range is best to swing or thrust from. It's also pointedly unrealistic, with minibosses taking a comical number of slashes to knock down. Ryoma's revolver never needs reloading, allowing him to fan that hammer all day long – hilarious in scenes when dozens of low-HP goons surround him.

Despite the inherent wackiness of blasting 30 men in as many seconds with a six-shooter, fighting here is gorier and more brutal than *Yakuza's* often-slapstick combat, with enemies getting impaled, sliced or shot point-blank. This goes double for the Heat Actions, the super-bar consuming special moves that defined the tone of the series. While there's some funny and weird ones, Ryoma mostly just straight-up stabs a dude. It does introduce some ludonarrative dissonance.

While Kiryu brutalised his foes, he didn't often appear to be trying to murder them. Ryoma, being a steely samurai, is no mad dog killer, but also doesn't seem to concern himself with whether his opponents live or not outside of cutscenes where he refuses to land a killing blow. This makes it all the more jarring (and funny) when the four bandits you just shot ten times each all get up, apologise for their rudeness, give you an item and scurry off home.

One interesting mechanical difference here is the Officer system.

As part of his quest to find a masked assassin that exsanguinated his adoptive father, Ryoma infiltrates the Shinsengumi, a brutal government police unit. This unlocks one of the two biggest minigames; full JRPG style dungeon crawling, clearing out bandit caves and forts free of story. It's where you'd be doing your

(optional) combat grinding.

To aid this, you get to collect 'officer' cards that act like a rudimentary gacha-adjacent magic system, letting you equip and spontaneously call in healing, buffs or

damage-dealing attacks. There's even a few special cards that summon characters (or animals) for spectacular finishers. It's not transformative, but it does add an interesting and customisable new layer to the combat that dovetails neatly with the optional content, even if Ryoma shooting lightning out of his hands does stretch plausibility during story fights.

ITEM FARMING

Not nearly as glamorous or as involved as the cabaret club management of past *Yakuza* games, *Ishin's* other major distraction gives Ryoma a small farmhouse to manage. You get to plant and harvest crops, turn them into home-cooked meals and sell the excess back to the town.

It's cute and relaxing and gives Ryoma a chance to bond with his teenage partner-in-farming/delivery-girl Haruka, but it feels tangential in a way that most of the minigames don't, with the farm existing outside of the regular game map and, annoyingly, only accessible by an NPC boatman in the corner of town. I found it far easier to casually roll into a totally anachronistic karaoke bar or gambling den and enjoy the minigames there than return to the farm.

Offering a good range of graphical options and tweaks, *Ishin's* PC port doesn't disappoint (as we've come to expect from the series), and it's unlikely to tax your hardware either, but there is one notable problem. That persistent plague of the present-day PC platform; shader stutter. Due to the game not doing its homework up front, the first time a new effect is used, the game pauses a couple of frames to process it for your specific GPU. Given that most new effects happen during dramatic fights, this can be frustrating, but it does get better over time as more gets cached. Still, it's a regular irritation that can hopefully be patched.

That one technical itch aside, there's little to complain about with *Ishin*, beyond it feeling a little bit dated. The key problem it faces is a value proposition. This is a series with 11 English-language entries released in the past five years on Steam alone. Many of them are great, and most can be picked up for a pittance, compared to *Ishin's* full-fat price tag. While an equally solid starting point to the series as *Yakuza Zero* or *Kiwami*, those are two \$20 games frequently discounted down to mere pocket-change.

Is *Like A Dragon: Ishin!* a good game? Yes. Is it a good *Yakuza* game? Definitely. Do I recommend it? If price isn't a concern, absolutely. But if you're a person with limited time or funds, then unless you're a long-time series fan absolutely fiending for more macho urban drama (with a historical twist), you might want to look elsewhere in the series, unless the samurai theme speaks to you. ■

FEELING LUCKY?

Kyo is a gambler's paradise



CHOU-HAN
A simple dice guessing game, but the crowd determines the odds.



CEE-LO
A slightly more complex dice game with point-multiplying lucky combos.



OICHO-KABU
A simple Blackjack-adjacent game played using stylish Kabufuda cards.



KOI-KOI
A complex rules-heavy two-player game using Hanafuda cards.



MAH JONG
A series staple, as complex and demanding as ever, but you can win big.



CHICKEN RACING
Who needs horses? When all else fails, just bet on the funniest chicken.

PC GAMER VERDICT

Like a Dragon: Ishin! is old-school *Yakuza* for better or worse, but still a good point of entry for newcomers.

78

The background of the cover features a large, menacing, multi-headed monster with a central face showing sharp teeth and glowing red eyes. It has several smaller heads on its sides, some with different expressions. The scene is set against a fiery, orange and yellow background with rain falling. Various characters are positioned around the central text. At the top left, a character with dark hair and a green headband holds a glowing yellow orb. To their right, a character with long brown hair and a blue jacket holds a pink energy blade. Below them, a character with red hair and a red headband holds a sword. In the center, a small, purple, cat-like creature with a mischievous grin is visible. To the right of the cat, a character with dark hair and a blue headband holds a blue orb. Below the cat, a character with a large, brown, bear-like headpiece and a wide, toothy grin is shown. In the bottom left, a character with a large, brown, bear-like headpiece and a red headband is shown. In the bottom center, a character with blue hair and a green headband holds a green energy orb. In the bottom right, a character with a large, brown, bear-like headpiece and a wide, toothy grin is shown. The title "POCKET BRAVERY" is written in a large, stylized font with a blue-to-yellow gradient and a black outline.

POCKET BRAVERY

CLASH HEAD-TO-HEAD IN A RETRO-INSPIRED 2D FIGHTER

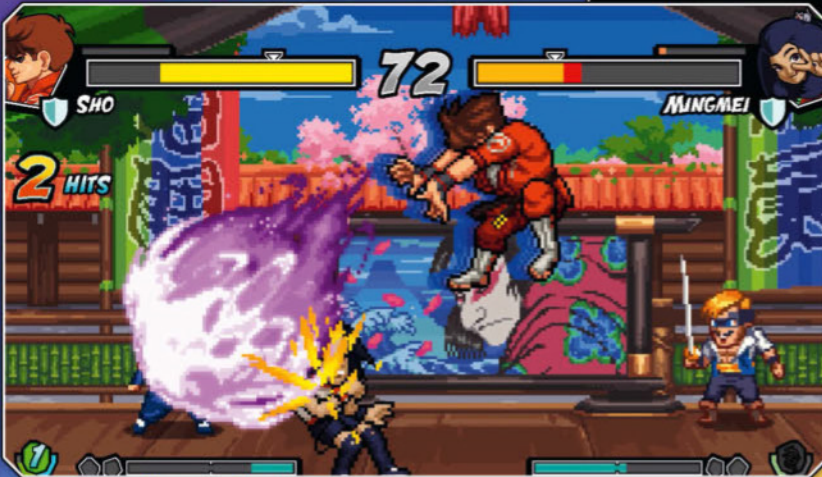


**MASTER INCREDIBLE
ELEMENTAL COMBOS**

**UNLEASH DEVASTATING
FINAL ATTACKS**



**ULTRA SMOOTH ONLINE
MULTIPLAYER WITH
ROLLBACK NETCODE!**



COMING SUMMER 2023

NINTENDO SWITCH PS5 PS4 XBOX XS XBOX ONE STEAM

©2023 Developed by Statera Studio. Published by PQube Limited.

There are a lot of strange but friendly people to meet in the city.



CITY LIMITS

Explore a bleak, brutalist city in **BABBDI**

I'm up for any game set in a brutalist cityscape, so it's almost a shame that the goal of *Babbdi* is to escape one. Babbdi is a city of looming tower blocks, endless concrete, and not a lot of grass, and I thoroughly enjoyed scouring its oppressive nooks and crannies, as I searched for the train ticket that would take me out of there – loathe as I was to leave it.

At its core, *Babbdi* is an exploration game, set in a surreal and downcast world that brings to mind *Pathologic*, *Half-Life 2*, and a neglected council block. You might call it a walking sim, but to see everything you'll need to do more than walk – you'll need to jump, climb, hover and fly, and even ride a motorbike if you can find one. I say *Pathologic* because of the bleak, oppressive air and cast of strange inhabitants, and *Half-Life 2* because it's a wonderfully interactive dystopia. There are a range of tools you can find that will aid your exploration, or that you can just pick up and muck around with, like the playable trumpet.

You probably remember playing *Half-Life 2* and getting your mitts on the gravity gun. *Babbdi*'s version of

that is a handheld vacuum cleaner, which might initially seem like another fun but useless gadget. That's because it just pushes you backwards – but then you think to point it at your feet. And *voilà*, suddenly you can hover in the air, letting you bound up buildings to the rooftops and walkways above.

There are a range of tools you can find to aid your exploration

UP AND AWAY

Babbdi isn't really a game about finding a train ticket, then. It's a game about unlocking the world, as you

gradually map the contours of its brutalist playground. First you stumble across that vacuum cleaner – or perhaps you find the torch, which will let you delve into the darkest corners of the city. The ultimate prize for your exploration is one I shouldn't spoil, but it's a

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

A first-person exploration game set in a brutalist dystopian city

EXPECT TO PAY

Free

DEVELOPER

Sirius Lemaitre, Léonard Lemaitre

PUBLISHER

Lemaitre Bros

REVIEWED ON

Intel Core i7-10750H, 16GB RAM, GeForce RTX 2060

MULTIPLAYER

No

LINK

bit.ly/Babbdi

catartic moment on a par with that bit at the end of *HL2* with the powered-up gravity gun.

There are other rewards for exploration. For instance, those characters I mentioned earlier. None will offer up their life story – just one or two lines of cryptic dialogue – but it's enough to make you wonder about who they are and what they're doing here, and they go some way to making *Babbdi* feel like a living place.

There are collectibles to find, though each is unique and fits with the world, being a curious object that offers some insight into the setting. They were a nice reward for my nosiness, reinforcing that our true purpose in the city of Babbdi is to explore it.

It's not hard to find that ticket, and once you have it you can leave at any time. But I suspect, like me, you'll immediately return to see what other secrets you can uncover. ■

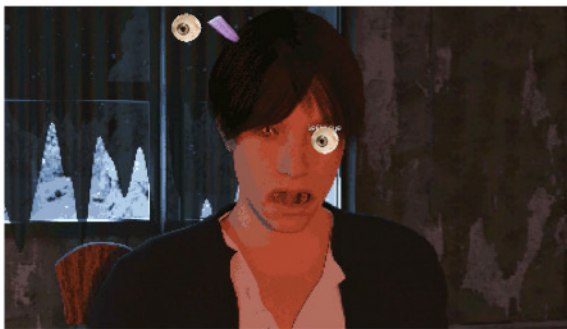
PC GAMER

VERDICT

An enjoyably interactive and vertical exploration game, set in a grey and gloomy city stuffed with secrets.

85

BELOW: You'll want to play the game twice to see everything.



NIGHTMARE FUEL

You snooze you ooze in **FEET IN THE SNOW**

You can go anywhere in a dream, making them rich settings for a game. Particularly a horror game, where their unreal, uncanny quality fits like a glove. *Feet in the Snow* has horror elements, but at its beating heart it's an adventure game, containing simple puzzles in a bizarre, uneasy dreamscape.

The overall atmosphere reminds me of *Silent Hill*, particularly *Shattered Memories*, which similarly featured frequent interruptions by a psychiatrist. Well, I'm guessing it's a psychiatrist here, as their probing questions intrude on the screen, asking the player what they did next in the dream. Did they go this way or that? Most importantly, did they follow the mysterious footsteps?

There is one big branching moment, where you decide to follow

the tracks or veer off-course, and it decides the entire second half of the game, with different locations and puzzles depending on your decision. Not that there's an overarching story, but several loosely connected and creepy scenes: the house filled with wriggling flesh and hidden body parts; the alley with its collection of malevolent shopkeepers. Nothing scary, exactly, but grungy and always faintly pulsating.

The puzzles aren't complex, with no item-combining or massive inventories to muddle through, but their purpose is to get you looking at stuff: at that bowl of pulsating flesh, for example, or at every individual lantern hanging on the ceiling. I like the way it ends, whichever ending you have arrived at. The game just closes of its own accord, as if you're waking from the nightmare. ■

72

NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
Abstract Machine

LINK
bit.ly/FeetSnow

EYE EYE

Finding hidden depths in platformer **STEREOGRAM**

Remember Magic Eye puzzles? Those trippy plaques of static that – if you could only convince your eyes to see them – would reveal hidden 3D pictures within. Well they're back, in game form, in Daniel Linssen's *Stereogram* – one of those rare games that made me appreciatively mutter, "Bloody hell," out loud.

Because, *bloody hell*. How is this Magic Eye suddenly *interactive*, taking the form of a pretty good platform game? This is a properly 3D platformer, with the unfortunate drawback that you can only look at it in bursts, as it exhausts the eyes.

I'm curious whether the Magic Eye-ness will be intact in these screenshots, because *Stereogram* is very specific in how it should be set up. The window has to be a certain

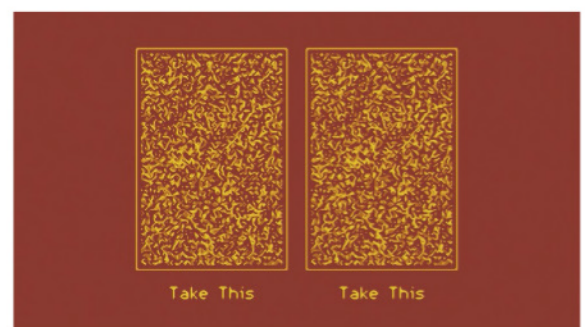
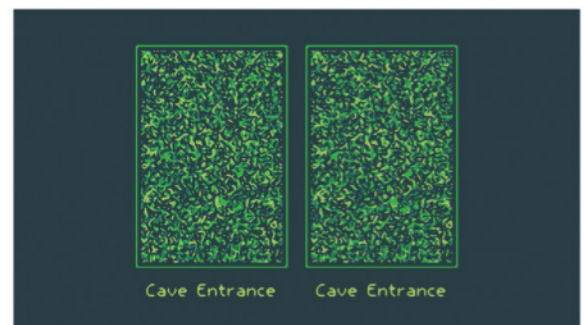
size, and there are various display tweaks to aid with viewing its obfuscated world.

If *Stereogram* weren't a stereogram, it would be a solid *Metroidvania* where you explore an interconnected world. However, its stereogrammatic quality is transformative. When it's a challenge to even see the basic geometry of a stage, clearing every chasm, no matter how trivial, is a rewarding experience. The challenge ramps up gradually as moving platforms are introduced, and as the game makes you wall-jump between them.

It never really got any easier, having to maintain that focused vision state, as I would have to *keep* finding it after taking (necessary) breaks. Eventually I found it a bit much, because I'm bad at precision-platforming. ■

80

BELOW: It's a minimalist game, with occasional visual flourishes.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
Daniel Linssen

LINK
bit.ly/StereogramGame

Sea battle or sexy pirate foam party? Why not both?



NIGHTMARE GALLEY

Sick-seared fish and comradeship in **SEA OF THIEVES**

Before release, the promotional material for *Sea of Thieves* focused on all the dramatic stuff: digging up lost treasure, bludgeoning skeletons, firing fat pirates onto desert islands. It's understandable they'd want their potential audience to expect breathless adventure. But the true joy of Rare's eccentric eye patch-'em-up doesn't come from the moments of swashbuckling bravado, but the daft bits in between.

An example: while preparing for a mission with my online crew, I decide to cook some fish while one of my friends spends her real-life money on a cat companion. Trouble is, I haven't played *Sea of Thieves* for ages and cooking was never a mechanic I understood. So I end up accidentally eating undercooked fish, which makes me ill, then vomiting into the frying pan as I try to rectify my culinary boo-boo. And since I've already been sick, there's little harm in snarfing down my puke-seared red snapper. And that likely contributes towards me expelling the remaining contents of my stomach over my companion and her freshly-purchased pet. A nightmare anecdote for emetophobes and cat-lovers alike.

There's a unique thrill to spotting an enemy ship on the horizon

This gleeful ineptitude is the heart of everything I love about *Sea of Thieves*. Yes, it's exhilarating when you're sailing at full speed on the open sea, the sheets are trimmed, and you navigate with precision. But it's somehow better when it plays out like Carry On Corsair in which you drop anchor too late, grind your precious ship against the rocks, and accidentally vomit on your crewmate's cosmetic upgrades.

DEATH SLOOP

And it's more fun now than ever. The early experience could feel sparse, especially when most of the missions were limited to digging up gold or collecting randomised pigs. But now, after more than four years of updates

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A raucous slapstick antidote to every other self-serious pirate game

EXPECT TO PAY
£35

DEVELOPER
Rare Ltd

PUBLISHER
Xbox Game Studios

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-7700 CPU @ 3.60GHz, 16 GB RAM, NVIDIA GeForce GTX 1070, Windows 10

MULTIPLAYER
Yes
LINK
seaofthieves.com

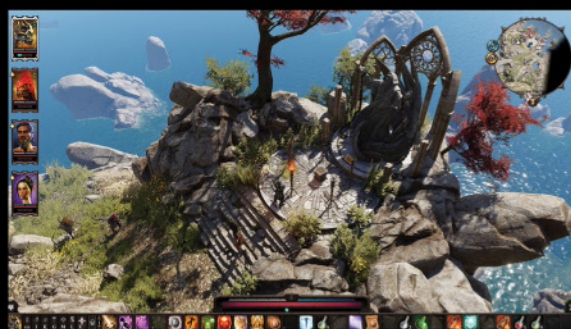
and additions, it feels literally unrecognisable in places. The *Pirate's Life* expansions might feel like a shilly tie-in, but there's substance to the 30-odd hour quest that it adds. And it's useful having that fresh purpose, even if the single most motivating factor in *Sea of Thieves* is the promise of chaos on the way to whatever middling quest you've selected. There's a unique thrill to spotting an enemy ship on the horizon, and the interaction with other players is what truly makes the game thrilling. Even with the updates, it's still basically impossible to play and enjoy alone: after an hour collecting treasure on my own, my ship got struck by lightning on the way back to port and sank. But that's manifestly not the point of *Sea of Thieves*. There's no joy to be had from regurgitating raw fish onto a pretend cat unless somebody else is there to witness it. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

A rare and beautiful example of a multiplayer game that gets better when you experience it with inept companions.

88

BELOW: 'Hiding behind a charnel mask' is the title of my erotic memoir.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
£30

DEVELOPER
Larian Studios

PUBLISHER
In-house

BONE IDOL

DIVINITY: ORIGINAL SIN 2: the weirdest RPG

This month's theme might not be immediately obvious from the selection of games, so I'll allow my character choice in *Divinity: Original Sin 2* to remove any ambiguity. I'm playing as Fane and we're all about skeletons.

One of the greatest things about *Original Sin 2* is how many bad decisions I can make. Picking an undead character isn't necessarily one of them, but it does have some interesting effects: healing spells hurt you, for instance, and poison revives you. Elsewhere, the game is as close as you'll likely get to having a smart, reactive DM, with the added bonus that all your RPing takes place in private, without the need for performance anxiety or other people. It's possible, for example, to kill any NPC, although the thought of that fills me with guilt. It's so open ended

that it takes time to deliberately misadjust yourself, especially if you're used to playing within the simple, defined parameters of a standard RPG. There are some elements, such as the ability to teleport, that might feel broken in terms of how powerful they are. But the balance here is beautiful, and these skills also encourage you to think creatively: you can teleport dead bodies into a boss fight and detonate them with the Corpse Explosion spell. The openness of it all comes through in the writing, too: there's a level of depth that you'd only get from having the most dedicated and dramatic frustrated novelist as your DM. It coalesces into something that looks and feels like standard fantasy fare, but the systems always reward me for being the worst and weirdest version of myself. ■

90

PILL BEHAVIOUR

Turning trauma into a game mechanic in *FRAN BOW*

Rounding up this month's *They're Back* is *Fran Bow*, a game that merits inclusion because of *Itward*: Fran's dapper, skeletal associate and friend to mentally-ill children everywhere.

You'll likely have gleaned from that opening that *Fran Bow* is darker than Tim Burton's coal shed. The Steam blurb describes it as 'creepy', which is something of an understatement: child beauty pageants are 'creepy'; Fran Bow's tale of dismembered parents, medical malpractice and psychological trauma is something sterner. The setup is horrible enough, but Fran's ability to phase into a shadow world after taking her medication provides the opportunity to make things even bleaker. The game's cast of damaged children would be heartbreaking enough without the occult knowledge that

they're being harassed by demons in another realm. Yet despite this, there's something hopeful about the game. Fran pushes past lobotomised patients and shadowy demonic presences with the indifference of a dog that doesn't realise he has wheels instead of legs. And there's a neat progression to it all, eased along by some puzzles that offer a decent challenge. All of this helps give you the sense that you're rarely stuck in one situation for too long, so the game's bleakest scenarios rarely have time to take hold. And there's *Itward*. As well as being an excuse to include *Fran Bow* alongside other skeleton-adjacent games, he represents something wholesome: the idea that there's some guardian spirit, however sinister, watching over children who've been buried under the weight of their own trauma. ■

72

BELOW: The longer you look at this screenshot, the more delightful it gets.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
£11

DEVELOPER
Killmonday Games AB

PUBLISHER
In-house

techradar.



The home of technology

techradar.com

HARDWARE

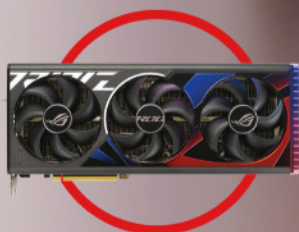
FOR GAMES DESERVE



102

BUYER'S GUIDE

Build a great gaming PC no matter your budget.



94

GROUP TEST

Do Nvidia's new RTX 40-series GPUs live up to the hype?

98

TECH REPORT

Top tips for staying healthy and active while PC gaming.

100

TECH TALES

Why ChatGPT has some game devs, coders and writers worried.





ROG Strix GeForce RTX 4090 OC

ASUS **£2,109**

The 4090 dialed up to 11

1 If you want the highest performing card on the market, there's one graphics card that sits above all: the RTX 4090. All RTX 4090 cards are impressive, but Asus takes it to the next level with this ROG Strix. Some people just want the best, price be damned. The PCB is built for overclocking with dual BIOS and external fan control. The Strix is one of few cards to include three DisplayPort 1.4a and dual HDMI 2.1a. A notable omission is the lack of DisplayPort 2.1 support –

a feature sadly lacking on all the RTX 40-series cards to date.

The RTX 4090 is built for 4K gaming and at this task, it has no competition. Feel free to turn up all the ray tracing options. And even if you're playing one of the few games that can't hold 60fps, enabling DLSS should see you through. The Asus ROG Strix RTX 4090 is a serious contender.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Mega 4K performance
- Cool and quiet
- Big price premium

SPECS CUDA CORES: 16,384 / BOOST CLOCK SPEED: 2,610MHz / MEMORY CAPACITY: 24GB GDDR6X / MEMORY BANDWIDTH: 1,008 GB/s / DISPLAY OUTPUTS: 3X DISPLAYPORT 1.4A, 2X HDMI 2.1A / TDP: 450W

GeForce RTX 4090 NB EX-V

COLORFUL **£1,699**

A gaming weapon

2 The Colorful GeForce RTX 4090 NB EX-V is a slightly more worldly option compared to the ultra premium ROG Strix. It's a card for users who want the core characteristics of an RTX 4090, without the expensive bells and whistles. The design is very reserved compared to some of the almost garish Colorful cards we've seen in the past. It comes with a small factory overclock, though it isn't the highest clocked RTX 4090 we've come across. It has some overclocking

headroom if you're willing to push the limits. It includes the same core count, ray tracing and DLSS capabilities of all RTX 4090s. It runs cool and quiet, as it should do given the massive size of the so-called Battle Ax cooler. If you want all the performance and features inherent to the RTX 4090 but don't want to spend big bucks, then this is worth a look.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- It's a 4090!
- Excellent performance
- The FE is superior

SPECS CUDA CORES: 16,384 / BOOST CLOCK SPEED: 2,565MHz / MEMORY CAPACITY: 24GB GDDR6X / MEMORY BANDWIDTH: 1,008 GB/s / DISPLAY OUTPUTS: 3X DISPLAYPORT 1.4A, 1X HDMI 2.1A / TDP: 450W

GROUP TEST

RTX 40-SERIES GRAPHICS CARDS

Nvidia's high end RTX 40-series graphics cards offer impressive performance, at a price. *By Chris Szewczyk*

A CARD FOR USERS WHO WANT THE CORE CHARACTERISTICS OF AN RTX 4090, WITHOUT THE EXPENSIVE BELLS AND WHISTLES

RTX 40-series graphics cards are impressive. They offer excellent performance, cutting edge features, and power efficiency. But their pricing has received some fair criticism. But considering their intergenerational performance uplifts, improved ray tracing, upscaling magic, mostly low noise levels and operating temperatures, these are still some desirable graphics cards.

We've tested two of each of the RTX 40-series cards released to date, led by the flagship RTX 4090. It's the fastest graphics card ever released but it comes at a steep cost that's unpalatable to say the least. Next up is the high performing and power efficient RTX 4080. The RTX 4070 Ti is the latest out of team green. It isn't quite the mainstream hero that we've been waiting for, but it's a bit of a step towards it.

If you don't mind paying, you'll have a card to power your rig for years to come.



3



THE GIGABYTE RTX 4070 Ti GAMING IS GIGABYTE'S ENTRY LEVEL MODEL

3

GeForce RTX 4070 Ti Gaming OC

GIGABYTE £875

An almost affordable 4070 Ti

3 The latest RTX 40-series GPU to be released is the RTX 4070 Ti. This card was once known as the RTX 4080 12GB before Nvidia embarrassingly unlaunched it. It's still an expensive GPU, but it's a step in the right direction.

The Gigabyte RTX 4070 Ti Gaming is Gigabyte's entry level model, selling for marginally above that MSRP. It's a big card, and a real eye catcher thanks to the RGB on the fans themselves. It includes all of the RTX

40-series goodies we love, including DLSS 3.0 support. When it comes to performance, it pretty much matches the RTX 3090 in performance while using much less power. And it costs a lot less than the RTX 3090 ever did, so from that perspective, it's a win. The Gigabyte isn't what you'd call a silent card but it's cool and efficient.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Relatively affordable
- Power efficiency
- Not silent

SPECS CUDA CORES: 7,680 / **BOOST CLOCK SPEED:** 2,640MHz / **MEMORY CAPACITY:** 12GB GDDR6X / **MEMORY BANDWIDTH:** 504.2 GB/s / **DISPLAY OUTPUTS:** 3X DISPLAYPORT 1.4A, 1X HDMI 2.1A / **TDP:** 285W

GeForce RTX 4080 XLR8 Verto Epic-X

PNY £1,249

Relative affordability

4 The second RTX 40-series card to be released is the RTX 4080. It delivers very good performance and power efficiency, but it's let down by sky-high asking prices. The PNY RTX 4080 XLR8 Verto Epic-X is a card that's among the cheapest of all RTX 4080s, at least, while still offering a high quality cooler and eye-catching design.

The PNY is a chunky 3.5-slot card, and with that cooler it's easily capable of dealing with the AD103 GPU. Interestingly, the

PNY card comes with faster 23Gbps GDDR6X memory than most, and of course you get a generous amount of RGB lighting. The RTX 4080 delivers RTX 3090 Ti-beating performance with superior ray tracing capabilities and the magic of DLSS 3.0. It does so with much lower power consumption, too – that's what we love about it.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Great performance
- Cool and efficient
- Expensive

SPECS CUDA CORES: 9,728 / **BOOST CLOCK SPEED:** 2,505MHz / **MEMORY CAPACITY:** 16GB GDDR6X / **MEMORY BANDWIDTH:** 736 GB/s / **DISPLAY OUTPUTS:** 3X DISPLAYPORT 1.4A, 1X HDMI 2.1A / **TDP:** 320W



DLSS 3.0

DLSS 3.0, or Deep Learning Super Sampling, is a killer feature that's exclusive to Nvidia's RTX 40-series graphics cards. Its aim is to increase framerates with minimal sacrifices to image quality and latency. It uses your favourite 2023 buzzword, AI, to upscale a low-res game into a higher resolution, and do so in a way that's barely noticeable to your puny human brain. Unlike prior DLSS versions, DLSS 3.0 adds Frame Generation capabilities to generate entirely new frames in addition to those the GPU renders natively. But DLSS 3.0 requires game support, so you might not find every game you play will make use of it. In those that do, it's well worth giving it a try if you're struggling to hold a smooth frame rate, or it might allow you to increase your resolution by a step.

GeForce RTX 4080 Amp Extreme Airo

ZOTAC £1,299

Fast and efficient

5 The Zotac RTX 4080 Amp Extreme Airo is, shall we say, curvy? Its design might be polarising, but it's certainly one to look at if you're a fan of RGB. It even includes an RGB header for an additional light strip. The Zotac is a big card, like just about every RTX 40-series card released to date. That means it's easily able to keep the temperatures of the AD103 GPU under control. The Zotac is built like a battleship, including a massively overpowered 24-phase VRM and

memory rated for 24Gbps. With that kind of PCB and cooling overhead, the Zotac RTX 4080 has some genuine overclocking headroom. Any card that delivers performance, power efficiency, and cool running, all while looking good, is well worth considering. The RTX 4080 really is an excellent GPU, and the Zotac is a well priced version of it.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- High boost clock
- Power efficiency
- Again: it's expensive

SPECS CUDA CORES: 9,728 / BOOST CLOCK SPEED: 2,565MHz / MEMORY CAPACITY: 16GB GDDR6X / MEMORY BANDWIDTH: 716 GB/s / DISPLAY OUTPUTS: 3X DISPLAYPORT 1.4A, 1X HDMI 2.1A / TDP: 320W

GeForce RTX 4070 Ti Gaming X Trio

MSI £879

The sound of silence

6 MSI's Gaming X Trio cards traditionally offer a good balance of cooling capability and low noise, and the MSI RTX 4070 Ti again excels. In fact it's one of the quietest GPUs around. The MSI strikes a good balance of affordability and features. It doesn't go overboard with the PCB design, but then not as much is needed for a 285W GPU. You get dual BIOS and the standard three DisplayPort 1.4 and single HDMI 2.1 outputs. The performance characteristics are

mostly the same as the Gigabyte card. It's a very good card for high refresh rate 1440p gaming, and it can even hit the 60fps mark in many demanding titles with ray tracing on. And that's without enabling DLSS.

It blends performance, and build quality into a balanced package. But like all RTX 4070 Ti cards, it's expensive at this time.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Excellent cooler
- Power efficiency
- Too expensive

SPECS CUDA CORES: 7,680 / BOOST CLOCK SPEED: 2,745MHz / MEMORY CAPACITY: 12GB GDDR6X / MEMORY BANDWIDTH: 504.2 GB/s / DISPLAY OUTPUTS: 3X DISPLAYPORT 1.4A, 1X HDMI 2.1 / TDP: 285W

When all else fails, there's always roleplaying as a healthy specimen.

CHARACTER BUFFS

Tiny changes that make PC gaming healthier

Scour the mainstream media for images of 'gamers' and even today you'll generally find 100 or so variants of Matthew Broderick in *WarGames* – unathletic, unkempt and occasionally bespectacled too for good measure. It's a vastly outdated trope that belies the most visible figures in modern gaming. The infuriatingly gorgeous YouTubers who make a living shouting at FUT packs. The shredded influencers doing boxing matches to promote their upcoming trap song or energy drink. But somewhere in that broadly drawn stereotype of the gamer, there's a grain of truth.

PC gaming is a lot of things: mentally and emotionally stimulating and nourishing, stress-relieving and effective in combating loneliness. What it is not, however, is physically active.

As someone who once raced for 24 straight hours in *Gran Turismo* as a young and eager staff writer for a magazine feature, I can tell you this with some authority: sitting down for extended periods isn't immediately compatible with a healthy lifestyle.

In fact the problems are numerous. Sitting with your spine in an unsupported position for long stints can cause aches and tightness. Depriving yourself of natural light (let's be honest, the curtains are pulled at the slightest

suggestion of screen glare hitting our panels) can interrupt vitamin D production and our sleep regulatory systems. And on those occasions when our games make wholly unreasonable demands of our time in a single session – looking at you, *Destiny 2* – we might find that our regular eating habits interrupted, and an insatiable desire to inhale something fried has set in.

This certainly doesn't apply to all of us who play PC games. It's an incredibly broad church, so broad that you couldn't make any accurate assumptions about any one gamer's health. But what you could say with at least some degree of accuracy is that the occupational hazards are there. That's good news. Because if the variable is the gamer and the constant is the environment we tend to play in, that means we can apply a few simple changes to that environment and produce some health benefits that anyone would find valuable.

BOTTLED IT

Step one: place a water bottle on your desk, or within reach of your usual gaming position. Studies have shown that hydration levels can affect everything from our cognitive ability to mood levels, physical performance and energy. Even slight dehydration – 1.4% or so lower than normal – can bring about headaches, tiredness and impaired physical and mental function. The good news is that the



Mind over matter

When it comes to mental health, despite years of studies which seemed designed to find ill effects of gaming, the general consensus in the academic community is that at worst it provides no significant negative effects, and at best can improve mood and cognitive ability. Numerous studies, including one published in 2020 by Oxford University, cited stress relief, combating loneliness, and healthy brain stimulation among gaming's boosts to mental health.

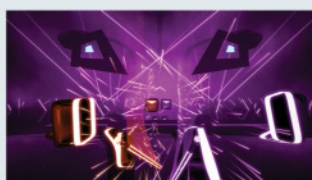


FAR LEFT: Yoga: the ancient art of being present. Better in VR, apparently.



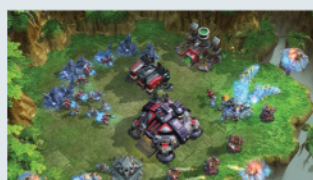
LEFT: You: old mugs of tea. This guy, an intellectual: tasteful houseplants.

CAL OF DUTY *Four calorie-burning games for the active gamer*



BEAT SABER

Playing Beat Games' musical VR odyssey exerts exactly as much energy as fighting off a horde of bees with your bare hands.



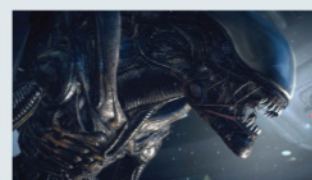
STARCRRAFT II

Professional players register about 400 actions per minute. Think of the energy those flailing digits are spending.



ASSETTO CORSA COMPETIZIONE

Force feedback wheel plugged in. FF strength set to 100%. Drive a few laps and feel the pump in your arms.



ALIEN ISOLATION

Your heart's going at about 300bpm as you open up Steam. An onslaught of calorie-burning fear hormones.

best and brightest scientific minds among us have devised a solution: drink some water.

Keeping a large water bottle on your desk makes it so easy to keep hydrated while you play. It's practically happening automatically, and the benefits to your cognitive function might even provide a tiny in-game performance boost – although that specific aspect hasn't been studied in much detail yet.

Step two: place a bowl of healthy snack foods next to that water bottle. Counterintuitive as it may sound to address the problem of a sedentary pastime by introducing more food to graze on, the science suggests that keeping a steady flow of fuel is less likely to cause glucose spikes than going long periods without eating, and then taking in a large number of calories at once. In turn, that means your body's less likely to store away the glucose you don't immediately convert to energy as glycogen, in the muscles, liver and as body fat.

Of course, that only really holds up if you really are snacking on healthy foods between meals. Nutrient-dense, low-calorie options like a chopped apple can be quite satiating due to the fibre content you're ingesting. Less nutritious options such as unsweetened, air-popped popcorn are still well worth swapping in – their calories per 100g are almost half that of crisps, and they're highly satiating. So you're less likely to go weapons free on your next meal. In short: snack sensibly while you play, and it's easier to eat sensibly afterwards too.

Next on the agenda is some natural light. Anathema though it may be to the VA monitor screen and the survival

horror game, sunlight interfaces pretty well with us humans. Exposure to natural white light aids our vitamin D production, and that plays a significant role in everything from our phosphate and calcium regulation to our sleep pattern. Studies have indicated time and time again that getting a lot of natural light during the day produces mood-boosting effects and longer, deeper sleep during the night. In other words, it's probably worth cracking a blind and angling your monitor away from the sun.

CURTAIN CALL

And that just leaves one more zero-effort tweak to your gaming setup: throw a few houseplants here and there. Like the other measures in this feature, sitting next to a succulent while you play *Darktide* isn't going to turn you into Jason Momoa, but it's going to bestow a few health positives that more than outweigh the minimal investment

involved. The RHS states a swathe of physical and psychological benefits to having plants around, linked to their air-purifying qualities. Everything from stress levels to attention span and even pain tolerance can be improved by a bit of flora, says science. Nothing can take the place of exercise and diet in a healthy lifestyle, and not every gamer needs to make changes in order to improve their health. But when you stop and consider the effort in implementing these moves – buy plants, fill water bottle, open window, place bowl – versus the worst possible outcome of it having no tangible positive effect on health, the arithmetic looks favourable. Join us next month for the 'lifting your PC' reps programme. ■

Phil Iwanik

A CHOPPED APPLE CAN BE QUITE SATIATING DUE TO THE FIBRE CONTENT

OUTSOURCED CODE

Why writers and game devs are worried about **CHAT GPT**

As a cutting-edge AI language model, ChatGPT has the potential to revolutionise game development by providing new tools and resources for developers. With the ability to generate natural language responses and learn from a vast array of data, ChatGPT can be used to create dynamic and responsive non-player characters (NPCs), generate narrative storylines and even provide personalised game recommendations to players. Moreover, by facilitating more streamlined communication and collaboration between developers, ChatGPT could help reduce development time and improve the quality of games. As the technology behind ChatGPT continues to improve and evolve, it could play a significant role in shaping the future of gaming, creating more immersive and engaging gameplay experiences for players.

Hopefully you thought there was something slightly off about that opening paragraph. Or at least that it seemed a bit asinine and phoned in, because I used ChatGPT to make it. And like every other working writer in the world, I'm kind of banking on the idea that you prefer this paragraph to the previous one. Since the OpenAI-powered text generator-meets-chatbot was launched in November 2022, its eerily human-like conversations have made it clear that there's a wide-reaching commercial application for it, or for advanced AIs like it. First against the wall with our blindfolds on are writers. If you can prompt a chatbot with all the knowledge contained within Microsoft's Bing search engine and get readable copy back, why would you pay a human to do it?

BINARY DOMAIN

Coders are sweating too. Written code is one of the great mysteries of the modern world to those of us who don't speak it, and that's most of us. ChatGPT can speak it, though.

It's read every line of code available to Bing, which is a large chunk of the internet. And you can ask it to compile code for you, even if you don't have the slightest idea what that code should look like. You just have to communicate the function it should perform. At least, that's all true in theory. But it's not a substitute for a real, human coder. Not yet.

In the r/gamedev subreddit, programmers have been testing and prodding at ChatGPT extensively since launch. The consensus is currently that although it can be used to compile basic code, and more complex functions when guided by a human expert, it's often "confidently incorrect". It'll present you with code, make a very convincing argument for why that code works, but said code will be a garbled mess that fails to function. So not only is it not accurate enough to rely on as a shortcut for simple tasks, the time demands it places on the human guiding it make it a very inefficient code assembly tool for

advanced work too. For now, in ChatGPT's experimental form, it's not going to be developing *Cyberpunk 2078* the first time someone types "make a triple-A futuristic RPG".

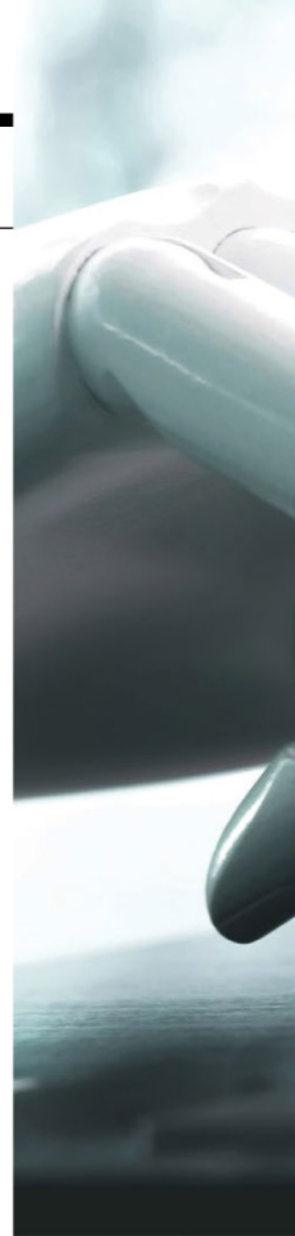
For writers, the prospect is a bit more worrying. That opening paragraph might not be the most sparkling editorial copy to grace this magazine, but it is coherent, filled with relevant information and grammatically slick. Hand on heart, I can't say the same about every paragraph I write.

Of particular interest is that assertion that NPCs can be created in more dynamic and responsive incarnations than we're accustomed to. That's not great news if you're a budding Tim Schafer or Marc Laidlaw who's been honing their craft in developing memorable characters, filling their mouths with convincing dialogue that reveals previously hidden truths about the human condition, and placing them in a world that inflames the audience's imagination.

COGITO ERGO SUM

Personally, I'm not afraid of being replaced. Because although it can recite every word of every line from *Ulysses*

FIRST AGAINST THE WALL WITH OUR BLINDFOLDS ON ARE WRITERS



PHIL IWANIUK
Phil Iwaniuk is a UK-based freelance writer and journalist specialising in videogames, technology and popular culture. (Thanks again, ChatGPT. Cheque's in the post mate.)

RENAISSANCE MAN *Great works already produced by machines*



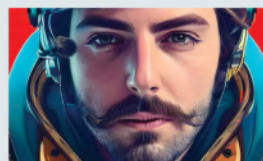
ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE HARRY POTTER

Unofficial Potter written by a predictive AI. "Ron's Ron shirt was just as bad as he was." Genius.



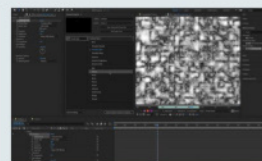
BRIAN ENO - REFLECTION

The legendary ambient composer's 26th album uses AI to generate infinite variations of itself. It slaps.



THAT SILLY LENSEA PORTRAIT YOU SHARED

Like any artist, it really captured your essence. Translation: made you 200% more attractive.



NUMEROUS ADOBE AFTER EFFECTS PLUGINS

Designers have already stockpiled plugins for AE that have been authored entirely by ChatGPT.



on command, along with every other novel ever written, ChatGPT doesn't yet understand why Ulysses is good. It can process every critique written about it, and understand the meaning and syntax of those critiques. But until the point that AI achieves general intelligence, it can't understand why particular pieces of writing resonate. It's because they reveal something about human nature that we hadn't realised before. Something universal about being alive. It can even understand that this is why we enjoy great writing. But that's not the same as ChatGPT enjoying it directly.

Good writing, like a good game, is about original thought. And that's the one thing our AI contemporaries can't articulate yet. It's always going to mean more to us as humans to hear what another human thinks of the world than to hear how a learning AI has interpreted all the world's information on a certain topic, according to a specific prompt. And let's face it, if AI does achieve general intelligence, we've got bigger problems than who's making our games and where our next commission's coming from. ■

Phil Iwaniuk

ABOVE: Could we ever learn something about the human condition from an AI?

BELOW: "And to introduce their next game, please welcome to the stage... Bing."



YOUR NEXT PC

BUYER'S GUIDE

Build the best PC for your budget



KEY

Budget build

PC gaming is for everyone. Pick these parts if you want to build a new, well-rounded PC for a good price.

Mid-range build

You want to run every new game at 1080p 60fps. This recommended build will see you through.

Advanced build

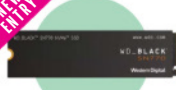
You're looking for the best PC on the market and superior components. But you still want to spend smart.

BUDGET BUILD

Enjoy 1080p gaming without breaking the bank



TOTAL
£999

MOTHERBOARD		B660M Pro RS ASRock £115 This is as cheap as we want to go while still offering room for expansion and upgrades down the line.
PROCESSOR		Core i5 13400F Intel £210 Intel's added four more cores to its entry-level Core i5 and it's become even more fantastic value.
GRAPHICS CARD		Radeon RX 6600 AMD £256 AMD's RX 6600 has become a budget champ for its affordable price and great 1080p performance.
COOLER		Laminar RM1 (included with CPU) Intel Free There's room for an upgrade here, but on a budget the included CPU will work just fine.
MEMORY		T-Force Vulkan Z 16GB Teamgroup £45 Goodbye 8GB, hello 16GB of speedy DDR4-3200.
POWER SUPPLY		Pylon 450 XPG £45 With an RX 6600 in tow we can get away with a 450W PSU, and the Pylon is just that.
SSD		WD Black SN770 500GB Western Digital £38 It's finally time to ditch SATA and go for an NVMe drive even in a budget machine such as this.
HDD		WD Blue 1TB 7200rpm Western Digital £38 You don't need a HDD, so feel free to cut this to save cash, but one sure helps if you're a virtual hoarder.
CASE		Zauron Aerocool £32 This Aerocool will let your components breathe and has space for further expansion and cooling.
DISPLAY		GW2280 BenQ £105 A 1080p60 VA monitor will see you through in style and, once you upgrade, will make a superb second monitor.
KEYBOARD		G213 Logitech £40 It may be a membrane switch board, but it's stylish and well-built. Sometimes that's worth more than cheap clicky switches.
MOUSE		G102 Logitech £35 A classic shape delivered in a sleek shell, this mouse fits all hand sizes and grips. A solid option for the money.
HEADSET		HS35 Corsair £40 This headset delivers in-game with its punchy drivers and clear microphone – it's perfect for video calls and multiplayer alike.

MID-RANGE BUILD

Our recommended build for playing the latest games



TOTAL
£1,669

MOTHERBOARD		B660M Mortar WiFi MSI £180 This MSI board delivers everything we need in a compact package and allows us to use much cheaper DDR4 memory.
PROCESSOR		Core i5 13400F Intel £210 Yes, this is the same CPU as the budget build. It's simply too good value to miss and perfect for high fps gaming.
GRAPHICS CARD		Radeon RX 6700 XT AMD £390 Price cuts have made this graphics card the one to beat at 1440.
COOLER		Laminar RM1 (included with CPU) Intel £30 Intel bundles a redesigned CPU cooler with some 13th Gen processors. This little chip chiller will serve us well for a while
MEMORY		Vengeance LPX 16GB DDR4-3200 Corsair £45 With plenty of capacity at 16GB, this unembellished memory has everything you need for gaming and more.
POWER SUPPLY		CX650M Corsair £93 The heart of your gaming PC is your PSU, and this 650W Corsair promises to keep your rig ticking nicely.
SSD		WD Black SN770 1TB Western Digital £70 There are faster PCIe 4.0 drives, but this is the best value for money SSD around.
HDD		WD Blue 1TB 7200rpm Western Digital £38 Just like in the budget build, this HDD isn't strictly necessary, but for a pretty low price it's nice to have plenty of extra space.
CASE		H7 NZXT £120 It's very clever of NZXT to design such an easy PC case to build into, and make it look so gorgeous too.
DISPLAY		S2722DGM Dell £260 With a snappy 165Hz refresh rate and a 1440p resolution, this Dell is an enviable blend of monitor performance.
KEYBOARD		Alloy FPS HyperX £80 As the name suggests, this keyboard is built like an absolute tank, with a steel frame and Cherry MX switches.
MOUSE		Model O- Glorious £59 Lightweight and responsive, the Model O- has made a name for itself among streamers and pros thanks to its clever design.
HEADSET		Blackshark V2 Razer £94 The Blackshark V2 offers up some killer audio quality to rival the greats. And at a reasonable price too.

ADVANCED BUILD

Go above and beyond with a PC powerful enough to end worlds



TOTAL
£5,397

MOTHERBOARD		MPG Z790 Carbon WiFi MSI £483 This MSI motherboard brings the latest chipset to bear without going overboard on excessive features.
PROCESSOR		Core i9 13900K Intel £589 This is the best all-round processor money can buy. It's a little overkill, but that's what this build is all about.
GRAPHICS CARD		GeForce RTX 4090 Founders Ed Nvidia £1,699 The RTX 4090 is immense, in every way. The performance it offers is unmatched by any GPU out there.
COOLER		Kraken X63 NZXT £123 One of the most stunning AIO coolers rebuilt with an updated pump, LGA 1700 bracket, and RGB lighting for more pizzazz.
MEMORY		Trident Z5 RGB G.Skill £188 This is a new memory standard for a new era of memory speed. DDR5 is blisteringly and fantastically quick.
POWER SUPPLY		Prime TX-1000 Seasonic £340 An ATX 3.0 PSU would also be good here, but we've tested this Seasonic and know it's worthy of such a build.
BOOT DRIVE		WD Black SN850 1TB Western Digital £119 Though technically this platform supports PCIe 5.0, for now we're sticking with WD's PCIe 4.0 speeds with the SN850.
DATA DRIVE		Crucial P5 Plus 2TB Crucial £177 This isn't as fast as our boot drive, but it'll more than suffice for storing heaps of games.
CASE		5000D Corsair £155 We swear this stylish mid-tower is bigger on the inside. It's the PC equivalent of the TARDIS.
DISPLAY		34 QD-OLED (AW3423DW) Alienware £1,099 You could be much more sensible on your screen than this. For this build, however, we only want the best.
KEYBOARD		G915 Lightspeed Logitech £185 Low-profile mechanical switches are just the icing on the cake that is the superb, wireless Logitech G915.
MOUSE		G502 Lightspeed Logitech £110 With a lengthy battery life and a phenomenal sensor to keep you gaming at your best, the G502 is undoubtedly one of the finest.
HEADSET		Arctis 7 Wireless SteelSeries £130 If you've settled on a wireless keyboard and mouse, the last thing you want is a pesky cable to your headset.

EXTRA+LIFE

CONTINUED ADVENTURES IN GAMING



“We should be asking for more variety in our open worlds”

SHERLOCK HOLMES: CHAPTER ONE is a vision of the untapped potential of the genre

As a genre, ‘open world’ has come to mean far more than just a big, seamless map. It conjures images of vast, big budget games with a huge range of things to do, including combat, exploring, searching for collectibles, solving puzzles, traversal and more.

But I always find it really interesting when games buck that template. I loved the way *The Evil Within 2* flirted with the idea of open-world survival horror, with its creepy town full of nightmares to sneak past. Or *The Pathless*, which, despite its protagonist wielding a bow and arrow, eschewed violence in favour of finding joy in discovery.

Sherlock Holmes: Chapter One uses its open world – the island city of Cordona – as a sandbox for mysteries.

▶ ROBIN VALENTINE



THIS MONTH
Seduced an elephant with a giant inflatable.

ALSO PLAYED
Returnal, *Blood Bowl 3*,
Vampire Survivors

Where most crime-solving games are purely linear, or take place across a series of confined scenes, *Chapter One* simply dots the map with unsolved cases and invites you to follow your nose.

HOLMES AND AWAY

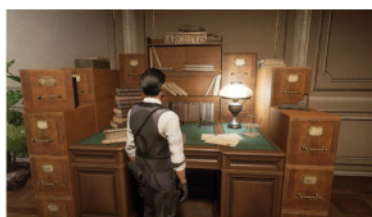
That combination allows for wonderfully naturalistic mystery solving. When you discover a crime is connected to another from the past, you can just walk across town to the police station and pull the file from the archives. When you discover the

TOP: You can talk to almost anyone in the city, though not everyone has something helpful to say.

victim attended a bar well-known to sailors, you can just head to the docks to ask some passers-by what they know. When you’re given an address to head to next, you have to pull out your map and find it, navigating by the city’s districts and street names.

And, if you’ll forgive me a cliché, it lets the city itself become a character in the story – as in so many great detective stories in other media. Just from the landmarks and bystanders around you, you can tell that, for example, Grand Saray is a district of wealth and privilege dominated by the colonial Brits, while Miner’s End is impoverished and home to gangs.

THE MAJORITY OF YOUR TIME IS SIMPLY SPENT WALKING AROUND THE CITY



Cordona's fairly modest in size – but an open world doesn't need to be huge to be impactful.

Later cases both develop and draw on that local character, allowing you to make logical leaps about where to go next.

It makes a real difference, too, that if you ever find yourself stumped by a case, you're free to just wander off down the street and see what other puzzles are out there. Perhaps you'll return later, to finish it off, or perhaps you'll find yourself caught up in an engrossing new series of riddles and forget all about it. Either way, you never feel like you've hit a roadblock in your deductions.

While there is some combat in the game, it's completely optional, and the majority of your time is simply spent walking around the city and exercising your brain. It's a lovely change of pace, and I think a sign that we should be asking for more variety in our open worlds.

How about a cooking game where you explore the region looking for new ingredients? Or a chess game where you travel around the city's parks, challenging the old-timers to matches? The point is, there's a million things we could be doing on these maps other than climbing up buildings and clearing bandit camps, and I'd love to see more games going their own way as *Chapter One* does. ■



Gunplay is satisfying, if not truly great.

“I explode another SinTEK goon's head”

Revelling in **SIN**

▶ ROBERT JONES



THIS MONTH
Shouted, “Who's your daddy!”
many, many times.

ALSO PLAYED
Neverwinter Nights, *FEAR*

The year is 2037 – so not too many years from now! – and I'm Colonel John R ‘Rusty’ Blade, the elite commander of a private security company called HardCorps. The company is named thus, I presume, because I'm hard as nails.

I am on the trail of the nefarious Elexis Sinclair, the leader of biotechnology firm SinTEK, who's planning on taking over the world by mutating humans. It's the biggest case HardCorps has ever had, and the stakes literally couldn't be higher, as the future of the entire world is at risk. Which is why I'm going take a moment in between shouting, “Who's your daddy!” as I explode another SinTEK goon's head with a shotgun blast to pick up this sack of dollar bills on the ladies' bathroom's floor before ejaculating, “Oh yeah!”

Yes, I'm replaying 1998 first-person shooter *SiN* (or, to be specific, the 2020 remaster courtesy of Nightdive called *SiN Gold*), and the beefy presence of Duke Nukem is still firmly on trend. Colonel John R Blade is a gruff beefcake who loves to commit violence, eye up pin-ups of

scantly clad women and, of course, grab and flash cash when possible.

BULLETS AND BABES

Indeed, despite releasing mere weeks before the original *Half-Life*, *SiN* plays like a game from a completely different era. And, you know what, after running, gunning and quipping my way through this nicely updated remaster (aside from the lack of ultra-widescreen support, which I had to hack in myself), I'm revelling in *SiN* as a throwback guilty pleasure.

The thing is though, as much as *SiN* is definitely inspired and limited by the era of first-person shooters that came just before it, such as 1996's *Duke Nukem 3D*, and pales in comparison to the seminal *Half-Life*, to dismiss it totally would be off the mark.

This is because not only does *SiN* offer some really rather satisfying gunplay and light platforming, but it also delivers some, for the time, really interesting features, such as the ability to drive a series of vehicles, log-in to computer and banking terminals with an in-game DOS-style command prompt, and for enemies to call for backup. A proper blast from the past, then. ■



“I grab the downed soldier’s weapon and start firing on his colleagues”

HITMAN 3’S Freelancer mode taught me I’m not as good as I think

If you’d asked me at the start of the year, I’d have told you I was pretty good at *Hitman*. I’ve earned Silent Assassin ratings on all main missions, and even have a couple of suit-only runs under my well-tailored belt. I once competed in an ad-hoc speedrunning rivalry with some friends – pushing us all to find the fastest routes while still achieving the perfect kill. I’m far from the best player, but I’ve mastered enough of the series’ systems to at least be competent.

Then I played Freelancer, and discovered that, no, actually, I suck at this. Here’s the problem: Freelancer takes away everything that makes *Hitman* comfortable, and leaves you to fend for yourself. If you die during a Freelancer mission you lose any equipment or weapons you took with you, and half of the money you earned up to that point. Weapons and gear can be bought and stored in your hideout, but only if you successfully complete your objective. Every time you take that gear out into the field, you’re gambling on its return.

▶ PHIL SAVAGE



THIS MONTH
Discovered life can be hard without quicksave.

ALSO PLAYED
Destiny 2, *Like a Dragon: Ishin!*

That’s fine, though. I don’t need tools. I don’t need weapons. I’m a highly skilled assassin. I am the weapon. Except, Freelancer isn’t just about killing its randomly picked targets. Each mission comes with challenges that, if completed, award big payouts. And here I am, carrying nothing of use. Of course I’m going to try to earn a little extra.

SOLDIER ON

In one mission in Santa Fortuna, a challenge asks me to complete my hit using just a single disguise. That shouldn’t be too hard, right? This is

A CHALLENGE ASKS ME TO COMPLETE MY HIT USING JUST A SINGLE DISGUISE

Hitman: I can recon the public areas, and then figure out what clothes are best to infiltrate my target’s location. A brief tour confirms that I should be fine with just the standard street soldier disguise. I find a lone guard keeping watch on the roof of a nearby building, and take him down.

Oh wait, I forgot: people sometimes look up. I was so busy making sure I couldn’t be seen from the second floor of a nearby building that I didn’t realise I was in full view of the people on the street. Panic erupts, and reinforcements come sprinting. I grab the downed soldier’s weapon and start firing on his colleagues as they run up the stairs. I run out of bullets and, as I sprint to grab a new weapon, I’m taken down.

If this was a normal mission, I’d simply quickload and pretend the mistake never happened. But Freelancer has no such option. I’ve failed, and there’s no way to hide that. What’s worse, I’m back at square one, having again lost all the tools and equipment I’d brought. I thought I was pretty good at *Hitman*, but Freelancer has taught me that I was just wise to the cheap tricks its main campaign lets you use. ■



LEFT: A whole world to be killed in.



BELOW: A full-blown shootout rarely goes well.



“I couldn’t shake the impulse to inspect every nook and cranny”

Discovering the joy of joinery in **A PLAGUE TALE: REQUIEM’S** wooden world

Since first stepping onto the streets of *A Plague Tale: Requiem’s* interpretation of 14th century Provence, I’ve made a habit of spotting its surprisingly detailed woodwork, which has me wondering whether Asobo’s environment artists moonlight as carpenters.

A credible medieval setting plays as much a role in the experience of this adventure as the performances behind its lead characters, siblings Amicia and Hugo. We’re asked to believe in their plight, even as the game’s fiction ventures into the supernatural. And providing ballast for the paranormal mischief are settings that feel rooted in the soil.

We’re led by the hand through Provençal landscapes, beneath the eaves of timber-framed houses and, increasingly as the game proceeds, through vermin-infested passages.

Standing proud through all these places is woodwork. Where other games settle for materials butting up dubiously against each other,

KYLE HOEKSTRA



THIS MONTH
Luxuriated in the constructed environment. Evaded plague.

ALSO PLAYED
Red Dead Redemption 2

Requiem’s artists betray an unusual respect for, and even enjoyment of, joinery techniques. This becomes clearer when making use of the game’s camera mode.

Here we find timbers mounted on cross lap joints, mortise and tenons anchoring the joists of upper floors, themselves ‘jettied’ over alleyways, and scaffolds fastened by big, chunky dowels. This is a world of wood, its buildings erected when wood was the principal material of human ingenuity. Once I spotted the first

interesting joint, I couldn’t shake the impulse to inspect every nook and cranny for a giant bracket, coach bolt or rope lashing.

The attention to detail extends to the trades. The game opens with a chase from medieval beekeepers, while elsewhere there are barrels mid-coopering and, of course, carpenters busy planing.

TIMBER!

I’ve spent a lot of time lately exploring corners of YouTube dedicated to people marking, measuring and cutting things with very sharp tools. Occasionally I’ll have a go myself. The result of all this is an obsession with woodworking when I see it in games. I love the sawyers toiling away in *Red Dead Redemption 2*, and the carpenters prising planks from tree trunks in *Assassin’s Creed Valhalla*.

But *A Plague Tale: Requiem* deserves special mention for its frankly gratuitous joinery, which has turned an enjoyable adventure set in the past into an unexpected way of indulging a hobby. ■

REQUIEM’S ARTISTS BETRAY AN UNUSUAL RESPECT FOR, AND ENJOYMENT OF, JOINERY

DISNEY DREAMLIGHT VALLEY

Two new characters and lots of quality of life changes. *By Lauren Morton*

After its first content update of the year in February, as I watched Scar lounge around a pond in which Ariel popped up for a bit of sun just behind where I was plucking pumpkins with newly moved-in Mirabel, I did begin to wonder when *Disney Dreamlight Valley* would begin to feel so packed full of animated characters that I'd feel as if I were crammed in at an actual Disney park. Not quite yet, it turns out, but this is only the first of several more content and character updates that Gameloft has planned for 2023.

The *Festival of Friendship* update brought two new villagers and several quality of life updates based on early access player feedback. The *Friendship* update includes Mirabel of Encanto and Olaf of Frozen to the *Dreamlight Valley* cast, both with their own unlock quests and friendship quests to embark on after.

Mirabel's is a bit on the simple side, beginning with stumbling across the doorknob to her home lying about in the Peaceful Meadow biome before checking off a brief task list of selfies and gift giving to convince her Mini-Casita house that it's safe to plop down in the valley once again. She's the first character of the Encanto crew though, and while her house is rather smaller on the inside than the outside, it's a lively thing that flaps its shutters and shingles

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE Early Access 2022	DEVELOPER Gameloft
PUBLISHER In-house	LINK disneydreamlightvalley.com

every time you approach. Olaf's quests are rather more involved, starting with a blizzard up in the Frosted Heights biome that you can only clear by finally cleansing the pillar there. Fittingly for the month and theme, it turns out that the snowy biome is overseen by the orb of love, which you'll regain by playing tag with some otherworldly squirrels to win back Olaf's carrot nose and coal buttons, assembling a rainbow of gems to open a portal, and more. After the blizzard clears, Olaf moves into the house that Anna and Hans already share – good thing it seems big enough for the lot of them.

To Mirabel's credit, though, she has one of the better friendship reward tracks including several cute clothing motifs, a furniture piece, some big round spectacles and a great paired set of a bright top and a long flowing skirt. Olaf's includes some smaller decor, motifs and a knitted sweater.

QUALITY OF LIFE SIM

On the quality of life side, the changes are downright hefty with several updates to storage chests, home decorating and the ability to change the role of each villager. Word of warning though: a couple of these

new niceties come with slightly stingy resource requirements..

Storage changes are one of the big wins. A new 'smart transfer' button each time you open a storage chest will automatically stack anything from your inventory on top of corresponding items already in that chest. No longer will we be

THE SNOWY BIOME IS OVERSEEN BY THE ORB OF LOVE

curating display tables as reminders of what's in each chest, either. For a pretty reasonable fee of ten softwood you can craft a custom signpost that takes up two floor tiles and can display one of 21 symbols to remind you what's inside.

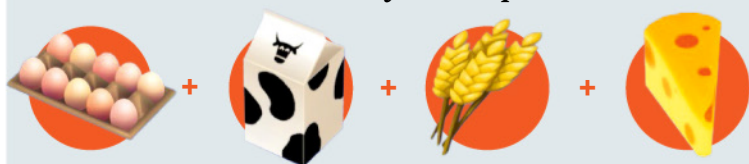
Oh, and several pieces of furniture marked as storage – wardrobes, fridges, and the potion cupboard too – can all be interacted with and used as a 16-slot container. It's the new medium storage chests that seem a bit steep to me. They require 25 hardwood, five of the iron ingots that I've been jealously guarding for the way too many main quests that require them, and a whole 1,000 dreamlight.

Changing the hangout role of any villager – in case you forgot to make anyone a digging character like I did – is also handled at the crafting table, though it runs you a very hefty 5,000 dreamlight. So that's a mistake you'll still want to avoid making.

Interior decor customisation got a couple handy changes too: the ability to pick wallpaper for each wall individually and the choice to change the appearance or placement of all your doors to adjoining rooms.

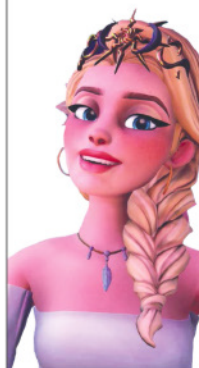
I hardly needed an excuse to return to *Dreamlight Valley*, but this new update sure did give me one. As life sims do, it will keep me busy until that Simba character addition that's planned for April. ■

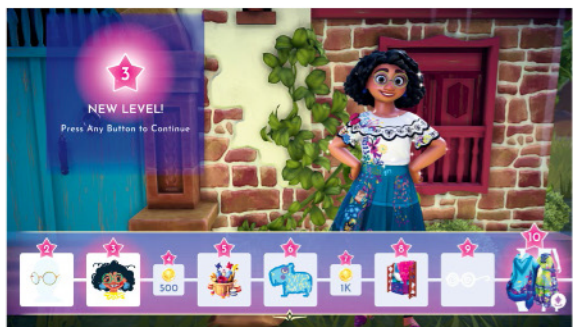
BUÑUELO BATTER *A tasty new recipe*



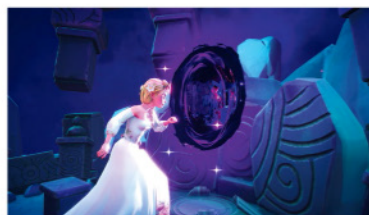
In one of her early quests, Mirabel needs help remembering the recipe for her family buñuelos. They require wheat, milk, eggs and a mystery fourth ingredient that Remy hints is

salty but not meat, fish or vegetable and can be bought from his restaurant. That narrows it down to butter or cheese. It turns out that cheese is the key!





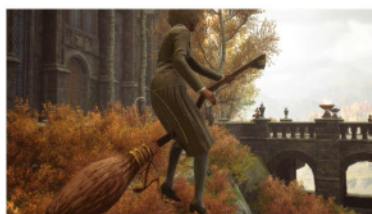
The new signs aren't exactly cute, but they're functional.



ABOVE: A new door in the frosted heights is where Olaf has been locked away.

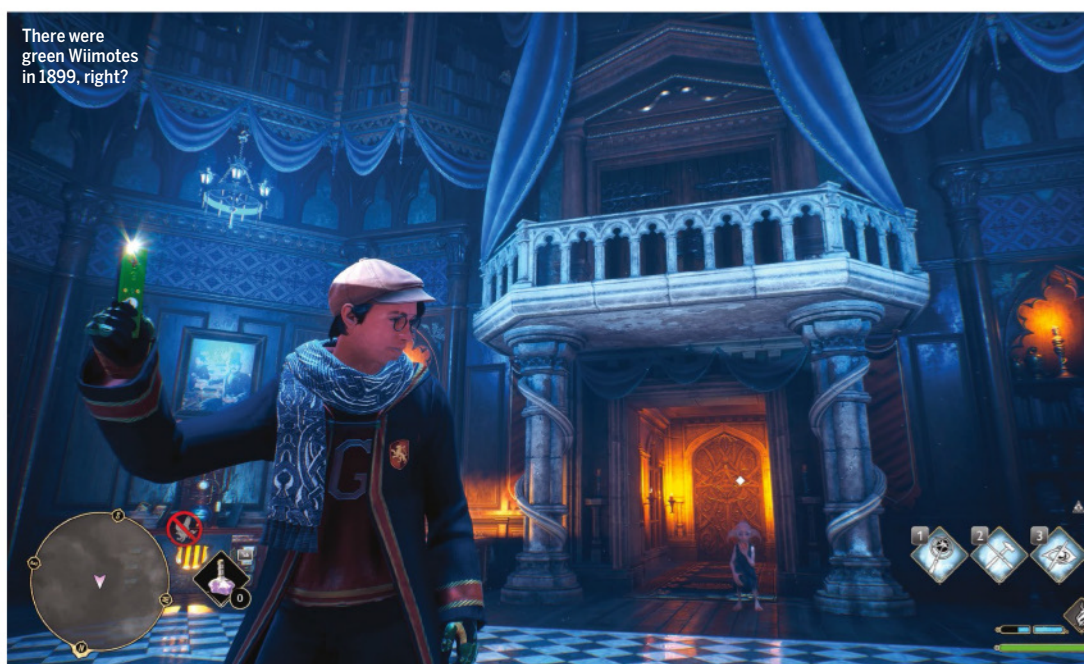


This mod probably isn't lore-friendly.



ABOVE: The best cars are sentient flying cars.

There were green Wiimotes in 1899, right?





HOGWARTS LEGACY

Magical mods. *By Tyler Colp, Christopher Livingston*

Park your broom and pocket your wand for a minute, because it looks like wizards and witches aren't the only ones wielding magic. Barely a day had gone by since the release of open world RPG *Hogwarts Legacy*, and already modders were enchanting the game with their own fixes, improvements and additions, including new control schemes for the mouse, tweaks to the UI, mods that improve the game's performance and appearance mods that include everything from custom wands to Thomas the Tank Engine.

Not only are new mods piling up fast, but so far installing mods for *Hogwarts Legacy* doesn't take all that much effort. For most of the mods listed here, you only have to unzip a file and drag it into the game's folder. Still, it's always safest to check each mod's page at nexusmods.com to make sure you've got all the instructions you need.

MAGIC TIME

New games often suffer from occasional performance issues, and many players have reported that *Hogwarts Legacy* doesn't always run smoothly. Issues like this are often fixed, or at least helped, by official patches, but if your copy of *Hogwarts Legacy* is the most current build and you're still having problems with stuttering or other FPS issues, you might want to take a look at the *Ascendio* mod.

I can't promise to understand everything that the *Ascendio* mod does to *Hogwarts Legacy*, but it apparently tweaks the game's engine parameters to make it run more smoothly. *Hogwarts Legacy*, like many Unreal Engine games, has a stutter problem due to the way it

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
Feb 10, 2023

DEVELOPER
Avalanche Software

PUBLISHER
Warner Bros Games

LINK
hogwartslegacy.com

handles shaders. Whenever you enter a new area in *Hogwarts*, it has a tendency to chug for a bit as your fps plummets. The *Ascendio* mod does its best to fix that. Hopefully the developer will be able to improve the issue from its end as well, but in the meantime it's worth a try if your PC seems to be struggling with fps drops.



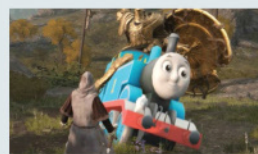
TWEAKS THE GAME'S ENGINE TO MAKE IT RUN MORE SMOOTHLY

Since we're tinkering with the game's innards, let's have a go at the UI, which is a little too big for some players sitting at their desks. High-resolution fans will appreciate the *Smaller UI* mod that shrinks down *Hogwarts Legacy*'s minimap, spell icons and other UI features a bit. It's customisable, too, depending on what you're looking for: the mod has three versions, each scaling the default size down.

Another issue players have on PC is a lack of control options. Most specifically, you can't map the mouse to certain in-game actions. *Hogwarts Legacy* lets you zoom through the world on a broom, but by default the keyboard controls are limited to WASD. The *Mouse Controls For Broom* mod lets you take your hand off the keyboard and control the broom with your mouse instead. You can rotate, descend and ascend with one hand as you fly around in the game. It's a simple change, but a

PAIN TRAIN

Thomas modded into games



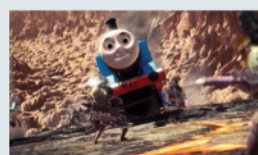
ELDEN RING'S TREE SENTINEL MOUNT

The first big enemy in the game now has train power.



KINGDOM HEARTS' TWILIGHT TOWN TRAIN

This has a very familiar look about it, doesn't it?



MONSTER HUNTER: WORLD

Naturally, this is the perfect place to find the giant rampaging train.



LADY D FROM RESIDENT EVIL VILLAGE

Indeed. Now you can call her Lady Theodora.

☞ welcome one for anyone that prefers flying with more granular control.

On the other hand (literally), PC players who prefer to use a controller or a gamepad might want to take a look at the *Better Broom Control* mod. The mod replaces the default flying controls and puts all of the movement into the left joystick, making the right joystick dedicated to moving the camera. If you want a more comfortable flying experience that resembles other games, this mod is the way to do it.

There's another feature of *Hogwarts Legacy* that doesn't include mouse controls: spellcasting, but now there's a mod for that, too. With the *Mouse Gesture to Spell* mod, casting spells in *Hogwarts Legacy* takes a different sort of skill. Instead of having to MMO your way through pages of spells assigned to numbers on your keyboard, you can attach spells to specific swipes or gestures on your mouse. Using the mod could make remembering spells during combat a lot easier and it's kind of fun to fling your mouse around like you're holding an actual magic wand.

WANDERING WANDS

While we're on the topic of wands, mods will let you swap out your standard sticks with something a bit more flavourful – though they don't add any new spells or operate any differently in-game, they just change the looks of your magic weapon. No doubt many players want to emulate Harry Potter himself, so *The Elder Wand* mod puts the most powerful wand in the Wizarding World's history, crafted by Death itself, into the palm of your hand. (You can put wand handles on it too, but they make it look a little weird.) With this mod you can conjure up your best character backstory to roleplay as the most powerful teenage witch or wizard in the world.

Other wands from *Hogwarts* lore have been added with mods, too. If you cast yourself as more of an evildoer than a world saver, you might enjoy the *Valdemort's Wand* mod, which lets you swing around the stick that killed Harry Potter's parents. (Sorry for the spoiler, but that happens almost immediately in the very first book.) If you're looking for more bad guy wands, the *Lucius' Wand* mod will let you cast spells with the wand of former Death Eater Lucius Malfoy. In my opinion, this is

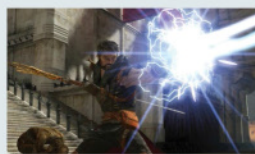
the coolest looking wand to mod in, due to the metal handle shaped like a snake's head. Cool.

If you're less concerned with lore, why not have a bit of fun by replacing your wand with a vegetable? There's a mod named *Asparagus*, and, well, that's exactly what it is: a spear of asparagus you can carry around instead of a wand. "You're a vegan, Harry." I have no idea why you'd want to replace your wand with asparagus, but it honestly looks very realistic. And if you want to go even weirder, especially considering *Hogwarts Legacy* takes place in 1899, you can swap your wand with a Wiimote. Choose from the standard white version of the videogame controller, or if you want to cast spells with some extra style, opt for the Limited Edition Luigi Wiimote. It's bright green, as you'd guess, and looks pretty convincing in-game.

Maybe you'd like to arm your wizard with a little more firepower? The *Boomstick* mod swaps your magic wand with Ash Williams' favourite weapon from the *Evil Dead* series, the 12-gauge double-barrelled shotgun he explains to a bunch of terrified folk is his boomstick. Again, it's just a cosmetic change, and your new boomstick won't do anything your original wand doesn't do. But it's a cool-looking skin and a tribute to another hero who has faced plenty of magical threats of his own.

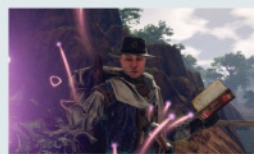
SPELLCASTERS

These games do a better job at casting spells



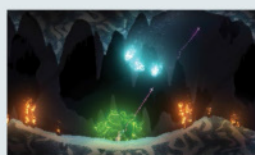
DRAGON AGE

The *Dragon Age* series turns magic into a deadly, reality-warping force.



OUTWARD

A creative system to use, and one that makes you physically weaker if you want to invest in it.



NOITA

The cause and effect of magic has never been on better display than here.



SPELLBREAK

The effects and combos of *Spellbreak*'s spellcasting are absolutely stunning.

CLEAN SWEEP

Since we're done with wands, it's time to have some fun with brooms. The *Nimbus 2000* broom mod equips your character with Harry Potter's speedy mount. It replaces the Yew Weaver Broom, which you can buy in Hogsmead for 600 Galleons. Now you can really feel like you're the legendary boy wizard himself. If

THE SHREK BROOM MOD DOES EXACTLY WHAT IT PROMISES

you're looking for another ride straight out of the movies, try the *Ford Anglia 105E* mod. It replaces your broom with the flying car from Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets – again, it really doesn't fit in at all with the timeline of the game, but it's a fun way to get around.

If you want to get extremely silly, the *Shrek Broom* mod does exactly what it promises. It turns the legendary sorcerer known only as Shrek into your broom. Haven't you always dreamed of sailing through the air while sitting on the legs of a jolly ogre? (The mod replaces the Aeromancer Broom, which is available to buy for 3,000 Galleon from Rohan Prakash, a small price to pay for harnessing the power of a godlike being.) So go equip Shrek, get your game on, and go play. And if green isn't your colour, the inevitable Thomas the Tank Engine mod (called *ThomasBroom*) replaces the Moon Trimmer Broom with everyone's favourite train. You'll find the Moon Trimmer at Spintwitches Sporting Needs Shop for 600 Galleons.

Finally, *Hogwarts Legacy* has a pretty big spider problem. Which is to say, it has spiders and they're pretty big. If you want to change that, pick up the mod called *Arachnophobia Mode*. Every spider in the game will be replaced with a red cube, and will no longer look terrifying as they scuttle around. Their icky spider webs will still appear in the world, but you won't have to worry about seeing any long legs or beady eyes. With this mod installed, even the game's spider bosses have entered their geometric era and will look about as threatening as a child's toy. Now that's magic. ■



ABOVE: If the UI is too big for your liking, a mod can shrink it a bit.

LEFT: You can't deny it: that asparagus looks quite realistic.



Practice magic with the fabled Elder Wand.



GET STARTED IN

HOGWARTS LEGACY

Become the strongest wizard in the Highlands. *By Sean Martin*

NEED TO KNOW

DIFFICULTY
Normal

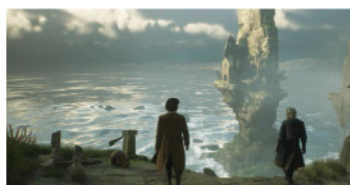
TIME
25 hours

VITAL LINKS

Solve every Merlin Trial:
bit.ly/3Sz09Zk

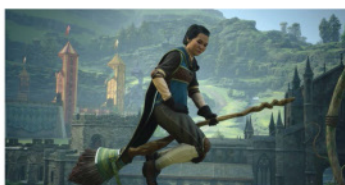
Open the puzzle doors:
bit.ly/3KlnxnH

Find the Daedalian Keys:
bit.ly/3SzNXcy



PROGRESS THE MAIN QUEST

1 While it's tempting to run off into the wilds as soon as you arrive at Hogwarts in search of magical beasts and mystical puzzles, it's better to progress the main quest a bit first. By the time you get to autumn, you'll have unlocked most of the main mechanics and features.



DUST OFF YOUR BROOM

2 Unless you want to hoof it across the Highlands to complete quests, you're going to need a broomstick. Luckily, you won't have to wait too long to take to the skies, as the Flying Class quest unlocks after you've completed the Jackdaw's Rest main quest early on.



DO YOUR HOMEWORK

3 Rather than poring over dusty tomes, *Hogwarts Legacy's* education is a tad more... practical? Complete your extra assignments to unlock powerful spells that'll help you solve puzzles, unlock treasure, and better murder goblins and dark wizards.



EYE ON THE PRIZE

4 If you're short on gold galleons to buy snazzy robes or items for extra-curricular assignments, hunt down some eye chests to open. If you use the Disillusionment spell, you can sneak up on these treasure receptacles and plunder them for 500 gold each.



GROW YOUR OWN

5 Another cost-cutting tip is to grow your own plants and potion ingredients. Once you unlock the Room of Requirement via the main quest, you can summon plant pots to cultivate a mountain of magical herbs.



MAGICAL BEASTS

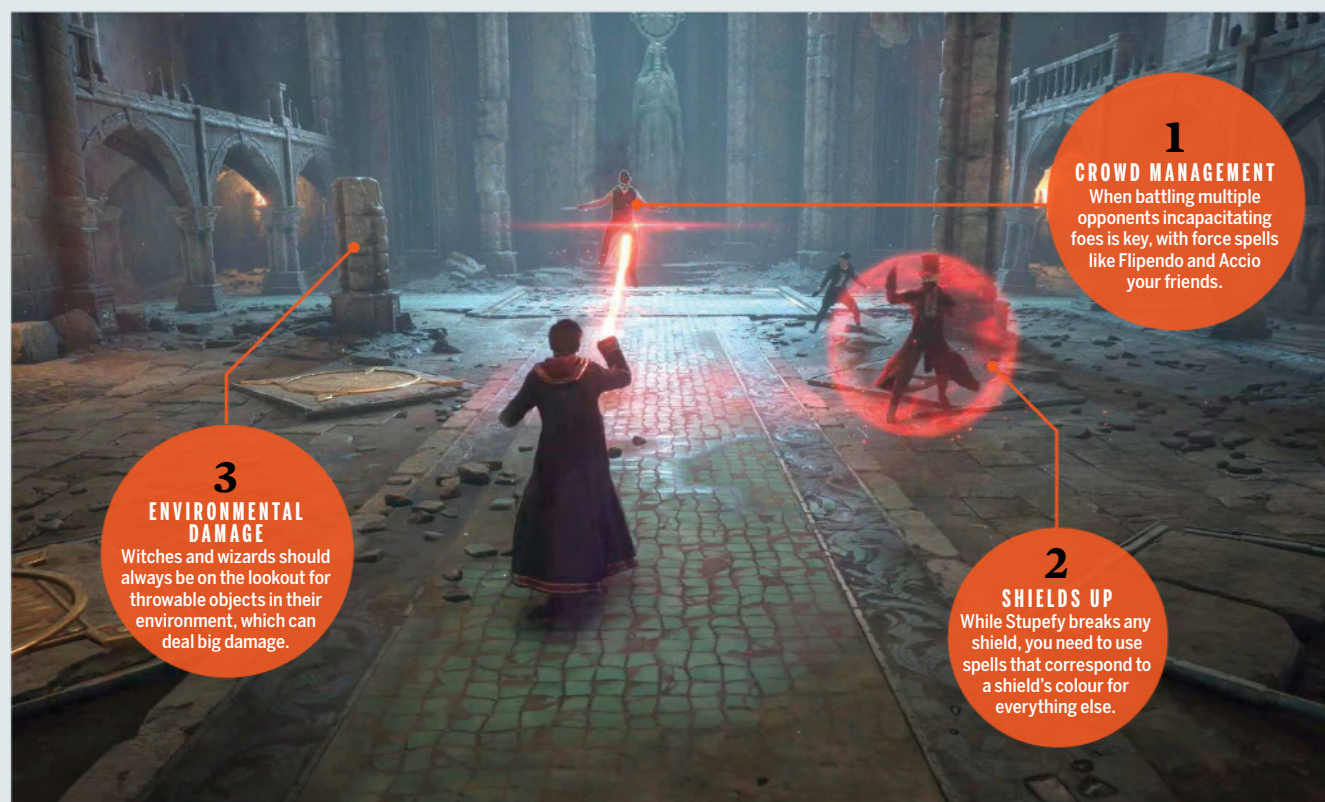
6 From Nifflers to Kneazles, the Highlands are filled with magical beasts you can rescue with your Nab-Sack and take back to the Room of Requirement to harvest their materials. You can also sell them at the Brood and Peck.



PROTEGO YOURSELF

7 While you have an array of attack spells, Protego and Stupefy are arguably two of the strongest. If you hold Protego after you use it to block an attack, you can stun any enemy and break their shield, which effectively ignores the game's entire combat system.

CROSSED WANDS *Duel dark wizards and magical monsters*



1

CROWD MANAGEMENT

When battling multiple opponents incapacitating foes is key, with force spells like Flipendo and Accio your friends.

3

ENVIRONMENTAL DAMAGE

Witches and wizards should always be on the lookout for throwable objects in their environment, which can deal big damage.

2

SHIELDS UP

While Stupefy breaks any shield, you need to use spells that correspond to a shield's colour for everything else.



A LITTLE ALOHOMORA

8 Many secrets are hidden behind locked doors, but you can pick them with Alohomora. Complete The Caretaker's Lunar Lament quest to get the spell, and bringing further Demiguise Statues to Gladwin Moon gets you upgraded versions of it.



MERLIN TRIALS

9 *Hogwarts Legacy* is stingy with its gear slots, but you can gain more by completing Merlin Trials. Once you meet Natty, you'll find the quest that introduces these challenges. Use Malloswweet to activate them, and don't forget to claim your extra gear slots.



JUST A FLOO

10 While a broom may be a speedy solution to traversing the Highlands, Floo Flames are the game's fast travel points. I'd suggest unlocking all of the ones in the north half of the map once you get a broomstick, since it'll make your life a lot easier when completing quests later.



SNEAKY WIZARD

11 At first it may appear like blasting your way into a dark wizard camp is the only approach, but you can actually stealth kill enemies. While using the Disillusionment spell, sneak up behind baddies to perform Petrificus Totalus – a binding curse that will dispatch them.



QUEST ASSURED

12 There are sidequests dotted around the Highlands, but I wouldn't worry about completing them all lest you find yourself too fatigued to finish the main story. The most important quests to complete are those in Hogwarts.



PREY BY PROXY

PART II

Our indirect journey
through Talos 1 continues.

By Rick Lane



Last time in my attempt to complete *Prey* without killing anything directly, I'd made as far as Psychotronics without firing a single bullet at the vicious alien hostiles overrunning the space station. Granted, I've fired plenty of bullets at objects around enemies, gas pipes, incendiary tanks, substance-crushing recycler charges, all of which may have led to the deaths of countless aliens. But there isn't a spot of Typhon goop directly on my hands. I'm like a mafia don who sends henchmen to 'take care' of his enemies, only my henchmen are pressurised containers and automated gun turrets.

From Psychotronics, my next objective is Deep Storage, where I must retrieve the plans for one of two arming keys I need to destroy Talos 1. To get there, first I need to pass through the station's GUTS (short for Gravity Utility Tunnel System) to access the Arboretum. Navigating the GUTS is fairly straightforward, apart from being harassed by a new type of Typhon called Cystoids. These radioactive black balls home in on my position before exploding. But I discover that they're attracted to the flexifoam bolts fired from my Huntress boltcaster, which makes the trip far less hazardous.

Talos 1's Arboretum sits at the top of the station, a luscious, peaceful environment only slightly spoiled by the prowling Typhon and the human corpses they've left behind. I cross the gardens and head down to Deep Storage, using a deployable turret to blast enemy Typhon as I go. Of course, when I get to Deep Storage, *Prey* doesn't just let me in. Oh no, that would be too easy. The bulkhead door is voice-locked by the station's chief engineer, Danielle Sho. Sho is MIA, but my AI companion January reckons I can artificially reconstruct Sho's voice if I collect enough of her audio logs, and the best place to do that is in Crew Quarters.

Back across the Arboretum I go, taking the staircase down to Crew Quarters. Here, I find something I don't expect – survivors! I'm about to approach them when I realise my HUD registers them as an enemy. The sole exception is the station's cook, who has barricaded himself in the kitchen, and won't come out until I either

kill the hostile crew, or deal with the creature controlling them – a floating, blimp-shaped Typhon called a telepath.

I don't particularly want to kill the possessed crew, since the survival rate on Talos 1 is already shockingly low. So it's time to invest in some Typhon powers. I've avoided doing this up to now, because too much Typhon DNA in my system will turn my trusty turrets hostile toward me. But the Mindjack ability, which temporarily turns Typhon to my side AND releases humans from Typhon control, is simply too perfect to ignore. Also, my hacking skill is strong enough that I can easily bypass the turrets' Typhon detectors – so long as I can get close enough.

I ENCOUNTER A NEW TYPE OF PHANTOM LOADED UP WITH ELECTRICITY IN THE HALLWAY

I grab Mindjack, and one by one liberate my crewmates from the telepath's control, knocking them unconscious in the process. I sneak around beneath the telepath's nose quietly moving the unconscious bodies out of the cafeteria, clearing the field of battle. I then scrounge a couple of turrets from the wider Crew Quarters, hack them so they don't instantly murder me, and then place them strategically in the cafeteria. Before I spring the trap, I toss a Nullwave Transmitter, a type of grenade that disables psychic powers, at the telepath, then deploy the turrets just as the transmitter triggers.

THOUGHTS AND PREYS

The telepath gives me a bit of a runaround, forcing me to relocate the turrets a few times, but eventually it succumbs. With the cafeteria now clear, the cook lets me in for a chat. The old man, whose name is Will Mitchell, seems suspicious of me, and sends me on an errand to collect his 'Award' from his quarters. "It's precious to me," he says. I'm heading that way anyway to look for recordings of Danielle Sho, so I check in as I explore the other crew bunks. As I approach the quarters of Sarah Elazar, I encounter a new type of Phantom loaded up

with electricity in the hallway. I set a trap for it using an EMP grenade, assuming it'll eliminate the creature when triggered. Instead, it only disables its electrical abilities, leaving its physical abilities very much intact.

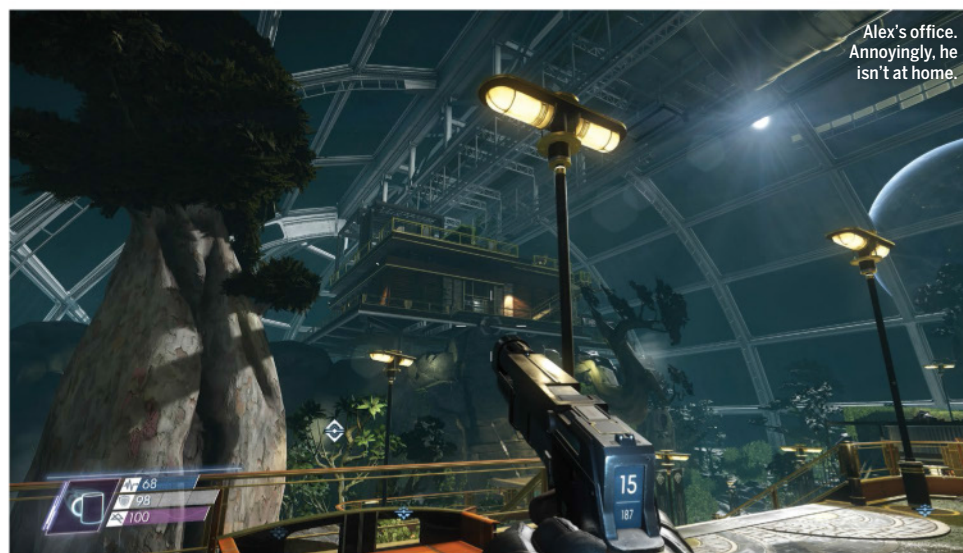
This is a fancy way of saying the Phantom is now slapping me about the head. Annoyed, I pull out my GLOO gun to immobilise it, but when I pull the trigger, the gun malfunctions, spraying GLOO everywhere except the one place it's supposed to – on the phantom. Now fully panicking, I turn around and scramble into a maintenance access shaft to escape. Brilliantly, this shaft leads around into Sarah Elazar's room, so the phantom waltzes through the unlocked door and attacks me again. At this point, I finally remember that I unlocked

THE RULES

1. Play *Prey* with indirect kills only.

2. Traumas and weapon degradation on.

3. No reloading except upon death.



➤ Mindjack, so I wrest control of the Phantom's mind and, while it's friendly, slip into the hallway and lock the door behind me. Absolute shambles. Lucky the fate of humanity doesn't rest on my shoulders, eh?

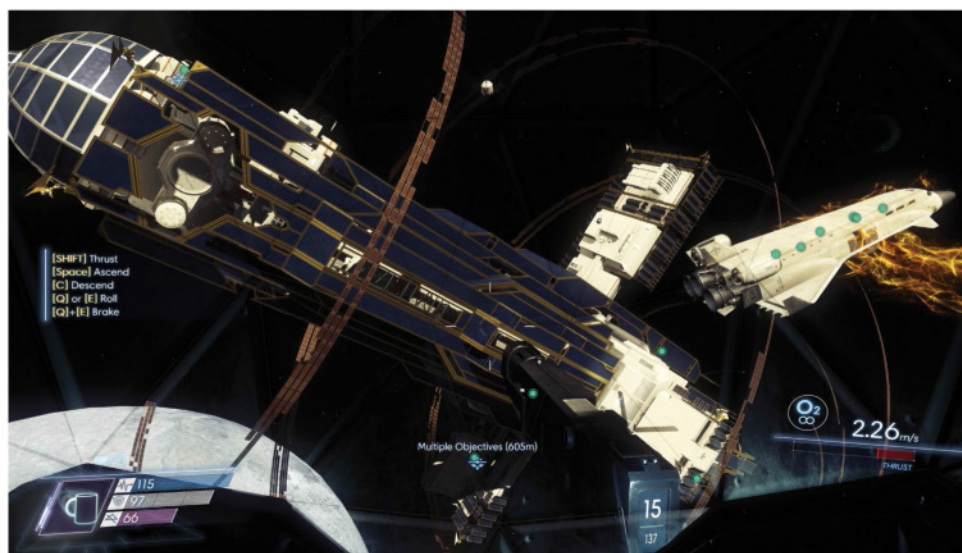
While I recover from this embarrassment, I spend a while nosing around the crew bunks, collecting recordings of Danielle Sho's rollercoaster romance with another woman named Abigail Foy before visiting the cook's quarters. I grab his award and, in typical immersive sim fashion, steal all his stuff and hack his computer. Weirdly, the image of his Transcribe recording shows a young, moustached American, rather than a balding, elderly fellow with a Ukrainian accent. Tsk, five years this game's been out, and Arkane still hasn't fixed all the bugs in it.

With enough recordings of Sho to access Deep Storage, I head back toward the Arboretum, stopping off at the cafeteria to drop off the cook's award. He's grateful, letting me into the freezer where he's stashed a bunch of supplies. Once I'm inside, however, he locks the door, trapping me. He then calls me over radio and starts babbling malevolently.

As I stand there, freezing my neuromods off, the penny finally drops. This man isn't Will Mitchell. He's... an impostor! The picture in the recording I saw wasn't a bug, it was a clue. A massive, howling, vibrating clue that I completely missed. One slow round of applause for Benoit Blanc over here, please. Let's hope I don't get asked to solve a real murder. I'd probably conclude that I did it.

While I suck at deduction, I am slightly better at spatial problem solving, and it doesn't take long to escape the freezer. On the way out, I find the corpse of Abigail Foy, Sho's girlfriend, murdered by the impostor cook. Her transcribe reveals that Sho is hiding on the station exterior, where she awaits a signal from Foy – banging on the gymnasium window.

BELOW: It's not easy to fit all of Talos 1 in a single screenshot.



THE SUMS OF ALL FEARS

Effective item combinations killing Prey's enemies indirectly

CYSTOID =

MIMIC =

PHANTOM =

VOLTAIC PHANTOM =

TELEPATH =

I head to the gym, where I deal with another telepath and its human puppets before contacting Sho. She appears in a spacesuit on the outside of the window, where she reveals the cook is an impostor (yeah I figured that out, thanks) and asks me to hunt him down. I'd say assassination isn't compatible with my playstyle, but let's face it, my hands-off approach hasn't stopped me so far.

I leave Sho floating in the void, retracing my steps to Deep Storage. I'm going to skip ahead a little here, because not much happens in Deep Storage. I get the blueprint for the arming key, then Alex locks down the entire station to stop me coming for the other one. Luckily, January reveals I can use the data-vault's manual ejection system to launch myself into space, then re-enter the station via the Cargo Bay.

TURRET SECTION

Freed from Deep Storage, I spacewalk down to the Cargo Bay, stopping off to rescue a survivor named Doctor Igwe from a cargo container stranded in space. Turns out he isn't the only person using the Cargo Bay to hide from the Typhon. Around a dozen survivors are holed up here. But

their path to the rest of the station is blocked by a small army of Typhon prowling Cargo Bay B. They ask me if I can help them clear it. Which, well, I'm sort of doing this thing where I don't fight anything. Is that cool?

It is, in fact, not cool. But there is another solution. Turrets. Lots of turrets. The survivors ask me to position two turrets in front of the doors leading to Cargo Bay B to help them fight the Typhon. But since I'm not going to be fighting myself, I figure we should double that. This means scouring the fuel storage bay and performing the old 'GLOO gun + recycler charge' trick on a few stray phantoms. But soon enough I've got the four turrets. I take a deep breath, and punch in the door code.

I'd hoped to conclude this month's diary with a dramatic retelling of the



THE ONLY WAY TO LIFT ALEX'S LOCKDOWN IS TO SWITCH THE STATION OFF AND ON AGAIN

ensuing battle. But it would also be fictional, because the moment the door opens, the Typhon get minced. Even the survivors are shocked by how easy the fight is. Instead, I'm going to tell you what happened when I went down to restart Talos 1's reactor.

The only way to lift Alex's lockdown is to switch the entire station off and on again, which means a long descent through the power station. The journey proceeds well enough until I get to the reactor's coolant chamber, a large hall filled with crisscrossing pipes that's swarming with mimics and phantoms. To help clear the infestation, I invest in a couple more Typhon powers – Remote Manipulation, which lets you grab and interact with items from afar, and Machine Mind, which is like Mindjack for robots. These skills make it easier to move and hack turrets into positions where they can deal with the phantoms. Combined with Mindjack, I'm able to puppet-master my way through the room.

The reactor hall is a lofty rectangular space with a freight elevator on one side and a stairwell on the other. The elevator is disabled

and I don't fancy climbing down the stairs, so I simply leap over the railing and drop, planning to use my booster pack to slow my descent. Then I look beneath me, and see a massive Typhon looming in front of the reactor. Ah, yes, I'd forgotten hostile turrets aren't the only price for using Typhon abilities. You also get hunted by the Nightmare – the largest, toughest, meanest Typhon in the game.

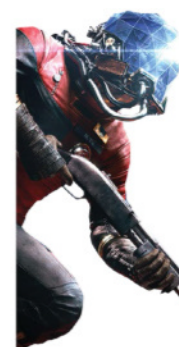
I quickly adjust my trajectory to avoid landing on the Nightmare's head. When I hit the ground, I'm almost killed outright by an enormous telekinetic blast. There's little cover in the reactor room, but to my right is a fenced-off storage area. I hack the gate and dash through, pausing a moment to heal up before grabbing a deactivated turret. Narrowly avoiding another telekinetic tsunami, I deploy the turret. But the autogun barely scratches the Nightmare before it's blown to smithereens.

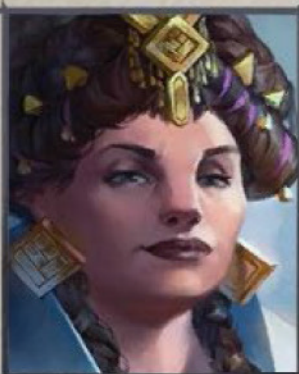
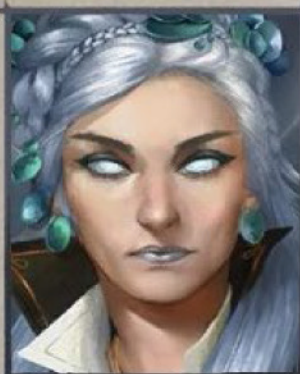
Then I remember Mindjack and rush forward, mollifying the Nightmare before it can attack again. The effect only lasts 20 seconds, but that's long enough for me to crawl into the void-space beneath the reactor, where the monstrous Typhon can't reach me.

After a couple of minutes, the Nightmare gets bored and wanders off. I emerge with mild radiation sickness and a major problem to solve. The Nightmare caught me unprepared. Next time it won't be so lucky. I have a plan. I'm going to find a way to lure the Nightmare to where I want it, and then, I'm going to kill it. Indirectly, of course. ■

ABOVE: Corrupted engineers can burn you with flame, but they're easily hacked.

BOTTOM LEFT: Poor Danielle.





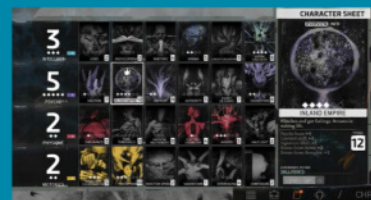
CRPG CHARACTER PORTRAITS

Classic fantasy faces just can't be beat

By Ted Litchfield



RIGHT: The abstract inhabitants of your troubled mind in *Disco Elysium* are a great new school example of the art.



As RPGs have 'grown up', we've gotten spoiled – full voice acting, cinematic cutscenes, non-hellish early games – but we used to be spoiled in a different way: the richly-detailed character portraits of classic RPGs almost serve as a distinct second art style for such games, co-mingling with rich environment art, pixelated character models and your own imagination to produce rich worlds.

It's before the advent of high-resolution graphics and you want to make a big ol' epic, Choice and Consequence RPG. Maybe throw some THAC0 in there for good measure. How do you communicate the excitement, romance and danger of your characters at a time when environment rendering was on point, but digital humans limited to sprite work and low-poly models? Many RPGs turned to lifelike portraits for dialogue and menu screens, and the turn-of-the-millennium classics the genre still looks back to today have some of the best.

BioWare artist Mike Sass describes the job of doing up character portraits as practically having fallen into his lap – in a recent letter he wrote for the game's 25th anniversary, Sass said, "Using Photoshop Version Three, my attempts seemed to be passable, so I became the portrait artist. The [*Baldur's Gate*] portraits were my first digital portraits ever."

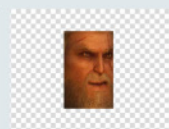
Troika's *Arcanum: Of Steamworks and Magick Obscura* has some particularly superb examples of RPG portraiture. *Fallout* co-creator Leonard Boyarsky supplies this surreal gallery of gnomes, elves, orcs and half-ogres all rendered like Victorian paintings or daguerreotypes. Seriously, there's a gnome or two in there that I'm almost positive had actual 19th

CUSTOM CANVAS *Can you do better than BioWare?*



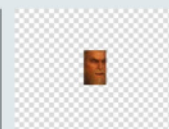
1 SELECT ART

I have it on good authority that I'm not the only PCG editor to source some tacky and incongruous Bhaalspawn portraits from DeviantArt.



2 ASPECT RATIO

Baldur's Gate wants these bad boys to have a perfect 19:30 aspect ratio, so you best get that elf lady into MS Paint and start chopping!



3 RESIZING

The game demands a small, medium, and large portrait of 38x60, 110x170, and 210x330 pixels respectively.



4 RECONSIDER

Are you sure you want to be doing this? That art is not going to look quite right bud, it'll be weird next to all the 1998 originals.

century American presidential portraits as their references.

Their effect gets driven home by the clash with the rest of *Arcanum's* graphics. I feel like I could squint and confuse *Arcanum* for *Fallout*, and the character sprites, derived from captures of 3D pre-renders, have this uncanny, almost impossibly smooth quality to them. It's peak '90s rendercore, basically, and while I love the style on its own, it's left to Boyarsky's portraits to sell the austere dignity of the setting.

ELVES, ORCS AND HALF-OGRES ALL RENDERED LIKE VICTORIAN PAINTINGS

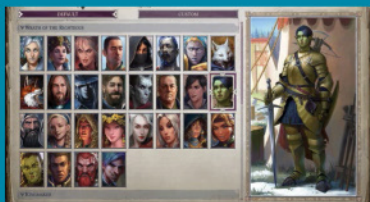
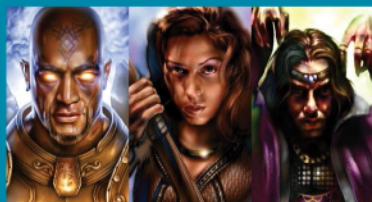
LATTER-DAY HEROES

As the 2000s progressed, the development of faster 3D graphics seemed to undermine the necessity of having portraits in the first place. Newer RPGs like *Knights of the Old Republic*, *Dragon Age* and Larian's *Divinity* games would eschew art in menus and UI for a little close up of the character model, and they were poorer for it. Tech ages fast while art is forever, and those potato-faced Eclipse Engine player models in *Dragon Age* are poor ambassadors for

their game when compared to Sass' portraits of just a decade prior.

Thankfully, the revival of classic CRPGs ushered in by *Divinity* and *Pillars of Eternity* has seen a new wave of the evocative fantasy portraits I crave in gaming. *Pillars* in particular set the bar high with its painterly approach, and it also demonstrates this art's capacity as a jumping-off point in character creation. There's this piece of *Pillars* concept art with a corresponding portrait in-game that depicts an Orlan Cipher getting a read on a crime scene. I found this prompt so exciting that I built my whole first character off it.

In addition to the classic head-and-shoulders shot, *Kingmaker* and *Wrath of the Righteous* also have these zoomed-out, full-body views in the character sheet, almost like a little cinematic snapshot of them in action. I was enamoured by this piece showing a half-orc rogue plying his trade in a moonlit alley and it's such a great piece of character art that it was enough to define all my time spent in this fantasy world. Owlcat shows no signs of slowing down either, already showing off some slick options for its upcoming *Warhammer 40K: Rogue Trader* and, like the rest of the CRPG genre, the future of the fancy portraits I love looks bright indeed. ■



RIGHT: BioWare's 2002 RPG *Neverwinter Nights* has some great portraits.





REINSTALL

OLD GAMES, NEW PERSPECTIVES



With Aribeth's true love hanged, she falls, and seeks a terrible vengeance

Wrangling the camera can still be a bit of a mission.



NEVERWINTER NIGHTS

A DnD fantasy epic that changed the RPG rulebook. *By Robert Jones*

Why did I reinstall *Neverwinter Nights*? First and foremost it is so I could relive its classy, beautifully written and emotional main narrative once again.

A brief synopsis. Awakening in the city of Neverwinter as a recruit summoned to help deal with its deadly crisis, the Wailing Death plague, which has ravaged the city and left piles of corpses in the streets, you the protagonist are soon introduced to Lady Aribeth de Tylmarande a half-elf paladin of Tyr, the Blind God of Justice.

Lady Aribeth is protector of the city and its ruler Lord Nasher Alagondar. She is also in love with Fenthick Moss, a cleric of Tyr, who she holds very close to her heart. To help Aribeth the player is tasked with

tracking down a series of Waterdhavian creatures, which are stolen from the city in the game's prologue. From these creatures a cure can be made for the Wailing Death, but upon finding the creatures and a cure for the plague being fashioned, Fenthick's superior cleric of Tyr, Desther Indelayne, betrays the entire city and steals the cure.

Desther, who it is revealed is part of a sinister cult, is eventually apprehended and executed for his crimes. But as he goes to his grave he takes Fenthick Moss with him, who though innocent and having nothing to do with the cure's theft or the release of the Wailing Death plague, is deemed guilty by Alagondar by his close association and executed. Fenthick is hanged from a tree outside the city gates.

The fallout from this is terrible, but brilliantly written and makes for

an incredibly compelling story. Aribeth, who has had her true love taken from her, and her destined future extinguished, loses her faith, sides with the true enemy of Neverwinter and, in a fantastic twist, turns against the city and leads a full-scale assault against it, with revenge against those who wronged her so badly now her glorious purpose, her new faith. And into all this you, the player, the Hero of Neverwinter, must wade, and bring about resolution.

Yes, the story really is that epic, and a great reason alone to experience *Neverwinter Nights*, either as a reinstall or for the first ever time. The very human element that sits in the centre of its plot really helps ground it and stops it getting lost like so many fantasy RPGs do in grandiose war and politics. But a fantastic core narrative is far from all that makes (and made upon its original release) *Neverwinter Nights* a classic. >>

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
June 18, 2002

DEVELOPER
BioWare

PUBLISHER
Infogrames

LINK
bit.ly/2jnBbhv



ROLLING A D20

When *Neverwinter Nights* released back in June 2002, it raised the benchmark for RPGs like few games had done up till that point and, arguably, have done since.

This was a game from a firm in BioWare that had made its name by producing RPGs, indeed some of the very best games of the genre anyone had ever seen, such as the seminal *Baldur's Gate* and *Baldur's Gate II*, and was in the early 2000s right on the top of its game.

But still, what BioWare went on to do with *Neverwinter Nights* was truly astonishing. Not only did it deliver that classy, sumptuous, complicated narrative fantasy adventure that it had made its name with prior, but it also pushed the technical boundaries of what games could look like and deliver, with *Neverwinter Nights* coming with the actual Aurora toolset editor used to build the game by its developers.

Out of the box gamers could not only enjoy a fantasy RPG based on a full-fat but expertly streamlined virtual version of *Dungeons & Dragons*, but they could actually build their own further adventures, too. And, what's more, *Neverwinter Nights* also delivered multiplayer

support and a Dungeon Master client, too, meaning you could not just create extra adventures but play them with your friends as well.

BioWare had delivered not just the ultimate 60-hour-plus fantasy RPG adventure out of the box, but

the ultimate RPG maker, too, and delivered a way for gamers to enjoy these adventures together. Today that may not sound so impressive, even though few games today deliver anywhere near that total package in my mind, but back in 2002, when multi-person PC gaming was very firmly still in local LAN-mode due to the infancy of broadband internet connections, it was magic.

And that's saying nothing of the fact that in just two short years BioWare had moved from the isometric 2D Infinity Engine to the fully 3D Aurora Engine, which set new standards at the time for gaming fidelity, pushing the day's best graphics cards to the max.

AHEAD OF ITS TIME

Replaying *Neverwinter Nights* today, though, also highlights to me another key way BioWare was ahead of its competitors. What's interesting is that unlike the RPGs it had made before, here you don't assemble and control a huge party of team members, such as in the *Baldur's Gate* series, as well as other fantasy RPGs of the period such as *Icwind Dale*, but instead you simply create and play as your own central character and then, if you so desire,

DNDLC

Expand your fantasy adventures easily



DARKNESS OVER DAGGERFORD

Explore the walled town of Daggerford and the surrounding Sword Coast in this 25+ hour adventure.



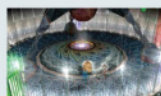
TYRANTS OF THE MOONSEA

Discover the region of the Moonsea in this sprawling high-level adventure add-on.



DARK DREAMS OF FURIAE

Fight to save a city filled with devils and mortals in this planar expansion module.



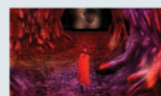
PIRATES OF THE SWORD COAST

Enjoy a swashbuckling adventure upon the high seas with multiple endings.



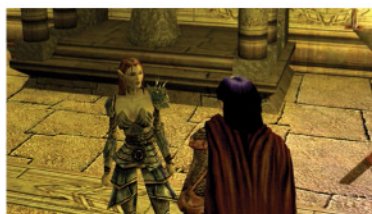
WYVERN CROWN OF CORMYR

Tour the land of Cormyr on horseback, joust against foes, and become a knight.



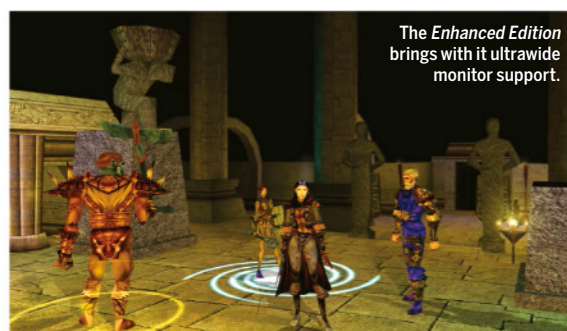
INFINITE DUNGEONS

Finally, why not enjoy procedurally generated multi-level dungeons with unique loot?



LEFT: More demanding fights definitely benefit from tactical pausing.

TOP RIGHT: The game is built on the 3rd edition D&D ruleset.



The *Enhanced Edition* brings with it ultrawide monitor support.

can enlist the support of one other NPC crew member.

This greater focus on just the player character is notable as it seeds the sort of gameplay experience and systems that would go on to be used in games like *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* and *Mass Effect*. The ability to select a more dynamic, follow the player, over the shoulder-style camera system shows this, too, even though most gamers likely opted for a more traditional bird's eye isometric viewpoint.

But this streamlining of how accessible and approachable such a vast and deep RPG as *Neverwinter Nights* is now screams to me as the start of the modern era of RPGs, where the powerful but complex and sometimes finicky user interfaces and mechanics of 1990s RPGs were replaced with alternatives that could be used by most gamers.

The result is that *Neverwinter Nights* is still incredibly approachable today in 2023, even if you've never played classic PC RPGs. In fact, because of its streamlined approach to core gameplay, with the player only needing to really look after themselves and, very lightly, one companion NPC, it's even more streamlined to play than many RPGs

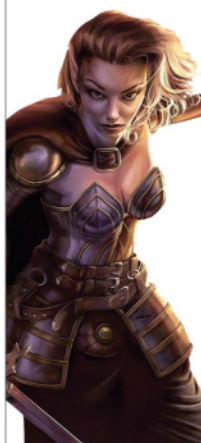
NEVERWINTER NIGHTS SCREAMS AS THE START OF THE MODERN ERA OF RPGS

that came after it, such as *Dragon Age: Origins*.

It's absolutely not an action RPG in the mould of *Mass Effect*, with spacebar pausing the action whenever you wish and action taking place firmly with turn-based invisible dice rolls, but unlike many RPGs of the 1990s and 2000s, you really can approach this game in a more casual way. There's a few old-fashioned difficulty spikes that require a more considered approach throughout the game, but in general you can run, slash, shoot and zap your way quite easily through the foes the game throws up. That's really refreshing, as so many old games suffer upon reinstall from now long-forgotten complexity issues.

CLASS IS PERMANENT

Obviously, there are areas of *Neverwinter Nights* that, even post-enhancement, feel a bit jarring today. The camera, across its various modes, remains a frustrating beast,



needing to be manually wrangled into position a lot, and inventory management can often feel like a chore, too. There are also no 'you need to go here' quest markers, or magical guides to carry you brainlessly to your destination, so you need to be comfortable reading quest entries in your journal for clues and instruction. And, while players do have to pay attention to their character class's strengths and play into them to be successful, *Neverwinter Nights* is comfortably modern in how forgiving it is.

In our original *Neverwinter Nights* review back in August 2002, Ross Atherton, PC Gamer's then resident RPG expert, gave the game a stonkingly high score of 94%, concluding that, "*Neverwinter Nights* is at the very forefront of not just its genre but the very medium of gaming." And that while, "*Neverwinter Nights* might sound like a frighteningly complex title, like all the best things, it's a complicated thing made comparatively simple." I feel today that these qualities, along with its enduring open platform for creating and enjoying extra content, make it stand-up still as a truly fantastic RPG to while away whole weeks in. ■

JODY
MACGREGOR

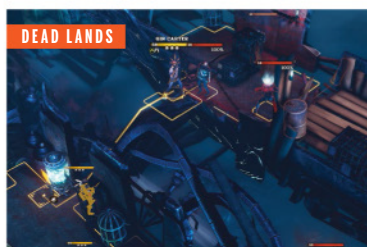
If it's turn-based I am probably down to try it, and if it's weird, lo-fi and indie then the same thing goes.



BUTTERFLY SOUP 2

bianna-lei.itch.io

→ 2017's best visual novel about teen girls, queerness and baseball got a sequel in 2022, covering parts of the story cut from the original for scope. Just like the first, it's hilarious and as detailed and true about being a teenage outsider as it is about baseball.



HARD WEST 2

hardwestgame.com

→ Turn-based tactics in a haunted Wild West, largely unconnected from the original *Hard West*. It's cowboys versus zombies, where enemies in cover can be defeated by careful ricochets, or just casting a spell that lets your witch switch places with them. Then shootybang happens.



KARDBOARD KINGS

henryhouse.com.au

→ Run a shop selling cards for a game similar to but legally distinct from *Magic: The Gathering*, buying second-hand singles or trying your luck with booster packs, then setting prices as the market fluctuates. Get to know customers, then rip them off or offer mate's rates.



SOLASTA: CROWN OF THE MAGISTER

solasta-game.com

→ A lower-budget adaptation of D&D5E than *Baldur's Gate 3*, with more emphasis on tactical combat that accounts for multiple height levels, light and darkness, and other complications. Has the goofy energy of an eager Dungeon Master's homebrew campaign.

MUST PLAY

A PERSONAL LIST
OF THE BEST
GAMES YOU CAN
PLAY RIGHT NOW

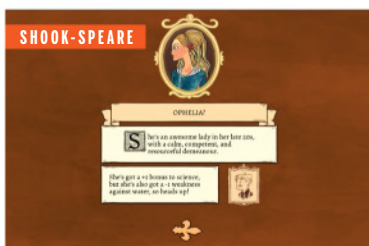
by Jody Macgregor



PENTIMENT

pentiment.obsidian.net

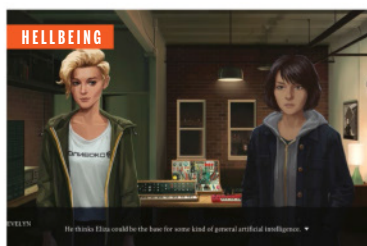
→ Late medieval murder mystery with art based on manuscripts of the era. How characters are drawn differs based on their age, the elderly are paint-flecked while the young are crisply outlined. Even the speech bubble fonts express your perception of their personalities.



TO BE OR NOT TO BE

gamebookadventures.com

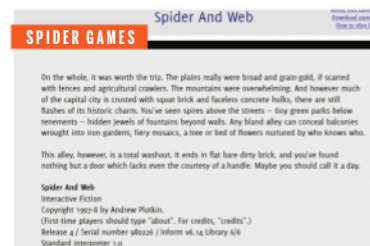
→ Adapted from the pick-a-path book *To Be or Not to Be: That is the Adventure*, itself adapted from *Hamlet*, only you decide what happens and to whom. Make Ophelia or *Hamlet's* dad's ghost the star, defeat pirates, punt Yorick, kill Claudius and earn 3,500 XP.



ELIZA

zachtronics.com/eliza

→ You're the human face of a therapy AI. The glorified chatbot asks trite questions, and its recommendations direct people to the software it's pushing. This satire of wellbeing apps has only become more pointed as the tech industry falls over itself to embrace mediocre AI.



SPIDER AND WEB

zarf.itch.io/spider-and-web

→ Ultimate lo-fi: a text adventure. You're a spy under interrogation, and the puzzles you solve are you revealing how you broke into the facility you're now being tortured in. Whenever things go wrong, the interrogator interrupts to say, "That's not what really happened!" It's clever.



Future Publishing Ltd Quay House, The Ambury, Bath BA1 1UA | Tel: 01225 442244 | Email: letters@pcgamer.com | www.pcgamer.com

Brand Director Tim Clark
Global Editor-in-Chief Evan Lahti

PC GAMER UK

Editor-in-Chief, UK Phil Savage
Print Editor Robert Jones
Online Editor, UK Fraser Brown
Senior Editor Robin Valentine
Senior Editor Rich Stanton
News Writer Joshua Wolens
Guides Editor Lauren Aitken
Guides Writer Sarah James
Guides Writer Sean Martin
Features Producer Mollie Taylor
Art Editor John Strike
Production Editor Tim Empey
Hardware Lead Dave James
Senior Hardware Editor Jacob Ridley
Hardware Writer Katie Wickens
Video Producer Josh Lloyd

PC GAMER US

Executive Editor Tyler Wilde
Senior Editor Wes Fenlon
Features Producer Chris Livingston
AU/Weekend Editor Jody Macgregor
AU Editor Sean Prescott
News Lead Andy Chalk
Hardware Writer Jorge Jimenez
Staff Writer Morgan Park
Associate Editor Lauren Morton
Associate Editor Tyler Colp
Associate Editor Ted Litchfield

CONTRIBUTORS

Chris Szewczyk, Kyle Hoekstra, Matt Elliott, Phil Iwaniuk, Luke Kemp,
Samantha Greer, Kerry Brunskill, Rick Lane, Tom Sykes, Dominic Tarason, Ian Evenden

PHOTOGRAPHY & ILLUSTRATION

Photographer Olly Curtis
Spy Illustrations David Lyttleton

DIGITAL PRODUCTION

Group Production Editor Steve Wright
Editorial Operations Assistant Nick Lee

PRODUCTION

Head of Production US & UK Mark Constance
Production Project Manager Clare Scott
Advertising Production Manager Joanne Crosby
Digital Editions Controller Jason Hudson
Production Manager Fran Twentymen

ADVERTISING

Commercial Director Clare Dove
Advertising Director Tom Parkinson
Account Director Jeff Jones
Account Manager Kevin Stoddart

INTERNATIONAL LICENSING

Head of Print Licensing Rachel Shaw

SUBSCRIPTIONS & CIRCULATION

Head of subscriptions Sharon Todd
Circulation Manager Matthew de Lima

SENIOR MANAGEMENT

Managing Director, Games and Entertainment Matt Pierce
Director of Group Finance Oli Foster
Global Head of Design Rodney Dive
Group Art Director, Games Warren Brown
Design Director Brett Lewis

SUBSCRIPTIONS Email: contact@myfavouritemagazines.co.uk | **UK orderline:** 0344 848 2852 | **International orderline:** +44 (0)344 848 2852 | www.magazinesdirect.com

DISTRIBUTED BY Marketforce, 5 Churchill Place, Canary Wharf, London, E14 5HU | **Tel:** 0203 787 9001 | www.marketforce.co.uk

LICENSING Email: licensing@futurenet.com

ISSN: 1351-3540

All contents © 2023 Future Publishing Limited or published under licence. All rights reserved. No part of this magazine may be used, stored, transmitted or reproduced in any way without the prior written permission of the publisher. Future Publishing Limited (company number 2008885) is registered in England and Wales. Registered office: Quay House, The Ambury, Bath BA1 1UA. All information contained in this publication is for information only and is, as far as we are aware, correct at the time of going to press. Future cannot accept any responsibility for errors or inaccuracies in such information. You are advised to contact manufacturers and retailers directly with regard to the price of products/services referred to in this publication. Apps and websites mentioned in this publication are not under our control. We are not responsible for their contents or any other changes or updates to them. This magazine is fully independent and not affiliated in any way with the companies mentioned herein.

IT'S ALL OVER...

U.S.S. PC GAMER

The PC Gamer crew's mission is to fearlessly seek out new games and developers, to boldly go where no gaming journalists have gone before



**ROBERT JONES
MOLYNEUX
APOLOGIST**

If a dev over-promises and then lets PC gamers down, Rob's always ready to bore the rest of the crew into submission in defence of the game.



**EVAN LAHTI
ADMIRAL OF
POWERPOINT**

Plotting the course the U.S.S. PC Gamer follows into unknown gaming territories, Evan is the ship's chief and resident zero-G hockey pro.



**ROBIN VALENTINE
OWLBEAR
WHISPERER**

Robin is a master of dealing with the countless strange and odd new games the U.S.S. PC Gamer's crew encounter on their travels.



**JACOB RIDLEY
CUDA CORE
WRANGLER**

Jacob ensures the U.S.S. PC Gamer's CUDA core-powered warpdrive engines are fed with a constant supply of dilithium crystals.



**LAUREN AITKEN
CHIEF DEV
TRANSLATOR**

When a new alien dev is encountered Lauren uses her encyclopedic knowledge of PC gaming culture to catalogue what it offers.



**WESLEY FENLON
HOT TAKE
POINT MAN**

When a new game is discovered Wes is in the crew's vanguard when it comes to describing why it, obviously, already sucks.

...UNTIL **APRIL 27**

Advertisement



WE'VE GOT THE OPTIONS. YOU MAKE THE CHOICE.

We show you what's worth considering. All you have to do is choose what's right for you. And with only good choices, it's hard to go wrong.

Car, home and travel insurance plus broadband, breakdown cover and more. Compare quotes for over 40 products.

Get more info or compare quotes at go.compare



**"ONE OF MY MOST ANTICIPATED
GAMES IN YEARS"**

- PC GAMER

DREDGE

CASTING OFF 30TH MARCH



STEAM



XBOX ONE



XBOX SERIES X/S



PS4



PS5



NINTENDO SWITCH



Dredge © Black Salt Games Limited, published under licence by TEAM17 Digital Limited.

"PS", "PlayStation", "PS4", "PS4", and "PS5", "PS5" are registered trademarks or trademarks of Sony Interactive Entertainment Inc.

Nintendo Switch(™) is a trademark of Nintendo, Xbox is a trademark of Microsoft® Corporation.